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FAR ABOVE RUBIES.

BY

MRS. J. H. RIDDELL,

AUTHOR OF

'GEORGE GEITH,' 'THE WORLD IN THE CHURCH,' 'MAXWELL DREWITT,'
'TOO MUCH ALONE,' 'CITY AND SUBURB,' ETC.

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By the same Author.

AUSTIN FRIARS.
TOO MUCH ALONE.
THE RICH HUSBAND.
MAXWELL DREWITT.
FAR ABOVE RUBIES.
A LIFE'S ASSIZE.
THE WORLD IN THE CHURCH.
HOME, SWEET HOME.
PHEMIE KELLER.
RACE FOR WEALTH.
THE EARL'S PROMISE.
MORTOMLEY'S ESTATE.
FRANK SINCLAIR'S WIFE.
THE RULING PASSION.
MY FIRST AND MY LAST LOVE.
CITY AND SUBURB.
ABOVE SUSPICION.
JOY AFTER SORROW.

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. QUITE IN THE COUNTRY	1
II. SQUIRE DUDLEY	9
III. THE FAMILY HISTORY	19
IV. HEATHER	30
V. AT SUPPER	46
VI. BESSIE'S LETTER	61
VII. MORE VISITORS	77
VIII. IN HEATHER'S DRESSING ROOM	88
IX. A LITTLE BIOGRAPHY	104
X. MR BLACK GAINS HIS POINT	118
XI. NELLIE	129
XII. LIFE AT THE HOLLOW	146
XIII. MR BLACK WRITES HIS PROSPECTUS	160
XIV. MRS PIGGOTT'S ASSISTANT	174
XV. HEATHER'S DARLING	185
XVI. POOR LALL	199

CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
XVII. MR BLACK'S TARTAR	211
XVIII. HOLLY BERRIES	226
XIX. GONE	238
XX. MR STEWART'S PROPOSAL	251
XXI. A FEW BILLS	262
XXII. HOW HEATHER TOOK IT	277
XXIII. LEAVING BERRIE DOWN	294
XXIV. NOT QUITE SATISFIED	307
XXV. A GLIMPSE OF THE CANVAS	314
XXVI. GREAT SUCCESSES	322
XXVII. 'LIKE A MAN'S HAND'	335
XXVIII. AT KEMMS PARK	347
XXIX. THE PAPER WAR	359
XXX. FOR EVERMORE	372
XXXI. IN BERRIE DOWN LANE	387
XXXII. WOMAN TO WOMAN	401
XXXIII. DIFFICULTIES	415
XXXIV. THE BUBBLE BURSTS	428
XXXV. FORGOTTEN	441
XXXVI. THE BITTERNESS OF DEATH	449
XXXVII. SUNSET AT BERRIE DOWN	465

FAR ABOVE RUBIES.

CHAPTER I.

QUITE IN THE COUNTRY.

THE way to Berrie Down Hollow lay along a lane, winding and narrow : not a prosaic lane, bounded to right and left by low-cropped, unromantic hedges, and scanty banks covered with coarse wiry grass, where never a wild flower would dream of blooming, but a delicious lane, bordered by old elms and beech trees ; where were smooth bits of turf, pleasantly suggestive of a gallop over the sward ; a lane by the sides whereof trailed brambles and the dark-leaved ivy ; a lane where the hawthorn in the sweet May-time, when it opened its earliest buds, stretched its white arms out across the grass, striving to touch the passer-by who idly paused to inhale its fragrance ; a lane where twined in picturesque disorder wild bryony and traveller's joy, dog-roses and honey-suckles, the woody nightshade and the greater bindweed (old man's nightcap, as the children irreverently call it) ; where the eye was refreshed by looking on soft cushions of moss and ferns, graceful, and drooping, and cool ; where blossomed in their due season primroses and violets, the wild hyacinth, the blue speedwell, delicious clumps of birds-foot trefoil, the pink cranesbill, the wood strawberry and anemone, ground ivy, the 'hinderling' knot grass, 'everywhere humble and everywhere green ;' St John's Wort, that balm of the warrior wound ; tufted vetch, the creeping cinquefoil, with many another wild flower, which in the early days little hands love to gather ; which boyhood,

and manhood, and middle age pass by unnoticed, but which come back fresh and bright as ever to the memory of the old man too feeble to totter away to the shady lane, to the warm sunny bank where the buds are springing, and the flowers blooming, and the lights and shadows flitting backwards and forwards, coming and going, coming and going just as they did half a century previously, when he was young and strong, and active like the rest.

We all know such a lane : it may be in one county or it may be in another ; in the far-away shire where the happiest years of our lives were spent, or within a walk of the great Babylon.

To the north of London there is still a perfect tangle of narrow country lanes, in some of which Lamb assured Barton he 'made most of his tragi-comedy.'

There are several not far from the churchyard where he sleeps so well. Close to his old home they wander away from Chace Side, up hill and down dale ; they strike out of the Southgate Road ; they wind in and out from Angel Lane to Bury Street, and thence by devious routes to Winchmore Hill and Enfield.

Some of the loveliest lanes on earth, perhaps, are those on the opposite side of the Lea, leading from Higham Hill to Chingford and Woodford.

Utterly still ! utterly quiet ! There the bee hums and the wild roses bloom, and there is heard no din or sound of that great city which lies so near at hand.

But Berrie Down Lane, as the road leading to Berrie Down Hollow was styled, wound on its pleasant way many and many a mile distant from London ; so completely in the country, so entirely out of the way of strangers, or even ordinary traffic, that very few persons, excepting the family resident at the Hollow, and their visitors, who (save of their own kin) were few and far between, knew anything of the beauty of that quiet walk, of that lonely approach to a still more lonely house.

Do you mind sauntering along it with me—sauntering slowly and lingeringly ? It is in the bright summer noon-tide we follow its windings for the first time ; but you can fancy how it looks in the spring and autumn likewise ; and the beauty of the lane grows upon you like the face of a woman who is more lovely than hand-

some, till you come to understand that even in mid-winter it will not look desolate ; that even when the buds of spring, and the flowers of summer, and the last leaves of autumn have departed, there will still be something left for the snows and frosts of winter to deck and crown right royally with diadems and jewels that sparkle and glitter in the cold gleams of the December sun.

There are the banks where the earliest primrose is to be found ; over which the full luxuriance of the summer greenery spreads and twines in lavish profusion of tendril, and branch, and drooping bough, and slender spray ; against which the brown leaves pile themselves when the storm king rides abroad, and the October winds begin to strip the foliage off the trees.

You can imagine now how the place looks in every season ; when the holly berries shine red and warm and glossy in the hedgerow ; when their branches, clad with polished green leaves, are torn down to welcome Christmas in hall, and church, and cottage ; when the birds begin to build ; when children part the boughs of the privet and the hawthorn in order to look for the thrush and the linnet's nest ; when the hyacinths come with the sweet mid-spring ; when the dog-roses, perishable as beautiful, open to the sun ; when the May bursts into flower, and the honeysuckle perfumes the air ; when you can pass over the brook dry-shod ; when the August sun is pouring his beams on fields where the reapers are at work ; when the leaves first change their colour, and then commence to fall ; when autumn's blasts whistle amongst the topmost branches of the elms, and winter's hail and snow descend upon the earth. You can fancy how Berrie Down Lane must look under all these aspects ; you know hereafter you could sketch the place from memory, when you come to recall its sweet tranquillity amidst the din and bustle of that great Babylon where your lot is cast.

The nearest railway-station, Palinsbridge, is eight miles distant ; the nearest town, South Kemms, four ; the nearest village, Fifield, more than two ; so that, although, as the crow flies, Berrie Down Hollow is not actually above thirty miles from London, it might be a hundred or two in point of accessibility.

‘Quite in the country, Mr Dudley,’ enchanted towns-people

were wont to remark ; whereupon, if the speaker chanced to be a man or one of his own kin, Mr Dudley would answer, ' Confoundedly in the country ; ' from which speech it will rightly be inferred that the owner of Berrie Down Hollow did not appreciate the advantages of his rural residence quite so highly as strangers had a way of doing.

And it was a pity, for a more picturesque spot could not have been found had you searched the home counties through. It was a place which took every one's fancy. The great men, who came down from London to stay with Lord Kemms when the season was over and the Row deserted, were wont to draw rein and turn a little round in their saddles as they passed The Hollow ; after which they would ride slowly on, looking back often at the dear old house planted on the side of a sloping hill.

But you shall not jump to the house in a minute after this fashion. You shall walk with me under the elm-trees ; you shall go gently down the declivity whence you catch the first view of Arthur Dudley's home ; you shall look over the fields lying on the south side of Berrie Down Lane, where the corn, his corn, is ripening for the harvest ; you shall pause and see in the distance, meadows where the haymakers, his haymakers, are at work ; you shall watch the men, and the women, and the children mowing and tossing that which in due time will be converted into money, to buy bread for him and his ; you shall descend the hill and cross the ford by means of a narrow foot-bridge, and, as you do so, you shall see his cows lying in the pasture lands chewing the cud, reflectively ; you shall ascend more leisurely, if possible, the steeper hill beyond the brook ; and, still pursuing your way onward, become conscious of hedges less picturesque, only because kept trim and closely cropped ; of banks where the grass is smooth and even, by reason of constant cutting ; where no brambles are allowed to trail their length along the ground ; where even the honeysuckle has to submit to pruning and clipping ; where the road is free from ruts ; and now you know that to right as well as left lies Squire Dudley's land, and that you are drawing close to his house, which is to be reached through those gates not more than half-a-dozen paces distant from where we stand.

One moment, however, ere entering. Do you notice how the grey pillars on which the gates are hinged scarcely show through the branches of the two trees of *pyracantha* that have grown around them?

Those shrubs are considered one of the great beauties of Berrie Down House. They are all white in the early spring. They are covered with green berries during the summer, which change into great masses of bright scarlet during the pleasant autumn weather, retaining their rich colour when the frost pinches the leaves of the evergreens, and the ice is thick on the mill-pond, and the snow lying on the ground.

They have taken years and years to grow, and the Dudleys are as proud of them as they are of their quaint home, of their broad acres, of their rich pasture lands, of the Hollow (whence their place takes its name), where the blackberries still grow, as they once grew over all the fields around; where there is quite a tangled thicket of underwood and broom and brambles, in which the children hide themselves, and tear their frocks, and pass the long summer days; whence they emerge, when the blackberrying season comes, with faces and hands dyed purple with the rich, luscious juice.

As the great men from London are wont to admire Berrie Down Hollow, so with all the strength of their souls the younger Dudleys love its every tree, and shrub, and stick, and stone.

The domestic chronicles contain no record as to whether Arthur Dudley, owner of the Hollow, had ever similarly cherished any such attachment. Of one thing, however, the reader may be certain, which is, that in his manhood he did not entertain the slightest affection for the place.

What was the old house, with its many gables—what were the fields, the trees, the tangle of brambles, the bloom of the broom, the scent of the hawthorn, the ripple of the brook, to him?

Let us pass through the gates, and approach by means of a drive, hedged almost with *laurestina* and laurel, Arthur Dudley's home.

The house is built of brick with curious dark stone facings, and over the doorway, carved in the same material, is the Dudley coat

of arms ; for before Lord Kemms, or Kemms' Park, was so much as thought of, the Dudleys were great people in the county.

Their day had gone by, however, and their fortunes, when we make their acquaintance, are like their coat of arms—a good deal the worse for wear ; for which reason, although the Hollow is a pretty place, it is not a grand one. It is a sweet home, but not a great mansion ; and the front, which shows towards the road, is unpretentious in the extreme.

But there is another side—that which catches the last rays of the setting sun—that which reveals itself to Lord Kemms' visitors when they have passed the gates flanked by pyracantha, and taken the turn leading away towards Kemms' Park.

The north front of the house is nothing : it is red brick and grey stone, with two windows on each side the hall door, and five on the first floor, and three dormer windows looking out from the roof like heads thrust forth from among the slates to survey the world. It is masked a good deal from the road by evergreens and great trees of arbor-vitæ ; and the dwelling-rooms in that part of the house are dark, and somewhat dull in consequence.

To the west all is different ; there the ground sweeps down from the house to the Hollow, and the drawing-room windows look out on the rich champaign country lying beyond, which is steeped and bathed every evening in the golden beams of the setting sun. Over this west front climb roses, and clematis, and honeysuckle. Here is a westeria, which puts forth its purple blossoms long before the laburnums think of blooming. Pleasanter bed-chambers there are none in England than those on the first floor, into the windows of which the earliest roses peep blushingly.

The lawn is shaded by many a grand old tree ; beyond the Hollow trickles a stream, which runs through Mr Dudley's property, after supplying a mill on the road leading to South Kemms. There are sheep browsing in the fields beyond. There is a great peace in the quiet landscape ; there is a stillness which strikes Londoners as almost oppressive. No hermitage could be more retired, no spot more perfect in its utterly homelike repose.

In such a place as this Time glides by, leaving few marks upon the road to show that his chariot has passed over it. Here the

philosopher thinks he could meditate in peace, and eliminate truths which the world would not willingly let die. Here the clergyman deludes himself with the belief that he could compose sermons which might stir the hearts of thousands. Here, where the pace of life is slow, and the mental pulse languid, the author fancies that alone with himself and nature he could discourse eloquently about man. Here the musician imagines he might discover that roc's egg—a melody resembling no other melody; but no! here indeed might the statesman rest, and the weary physician recruit his own exhausted energies; here the great engineer might forget his thousand schemes, and the speculator almost withdraw his mind from the price of shares and the rise and fall of debentures;—here in Nature's temple, if you will, where men may come and hold communion with her; here is her infirmary likewise, where she visits with sleep the heavy eyelids, and recruits with wine and oil the body which has been worsted in the world's fight; here she lays her cool hand on burning foreheads, and compels the overtaxed mind to lie fallow; here is the place for rest, if you will; but it is not the place for work.

Out in the battle-field, where the city streets are full of eager soldiers; out where the fray is fiercest, the fire strongest; out where life is not a tranquil dream, but a mad struggle; where men go to their long rest not rusted, but worn; where the night's slumber is short, and the day's labour long; out where as iron sharp- eneth iron, so doth the face of a man his friend;—there is the only place for energies to be aroused and genius developed, for profitable work to be accomplished, for life's best lesson to be learned.

Thus, at least a dozen times a day, Arthur Dudley, owner of 'The Hollow,' is in the habit of expressing himself; and yet you know, as you look in his face, that he is a man whose energy is not to be depended on, whose genius even to a stranger seems problematical; who has never practically conjugated the word 'work;' who could not be an apt pupil in any of life's many schools, no matter who were his teachers, no matter what his opportunities.

A handsome man if you will, with his thick brown hair, with

his soft, silky moustache, with his kindly blue eyes, with his regular delicately-cut features, and yet many a plainer face might better, I should imagine, win and retain a woman's love.

His body, like his mind, lacks thews and sinews. He is not one of whom you dare prophesy that, God giving him health and ordinary success, he would climb high. Rather he is one of those of whom you might safely predict, that if he attempted to climb at all, he would fall back grievously worsted.

There are some people who seem to be mentally surefooted ; and there are others who find every step to fortune so slippery, that, giving them time enough, they are certain ultimately to get their necks broken in attempting the ascent.

But, under the shelter of his own trees, what can Squire Dudley need with strength beyond that wherewith nature has provided him ? It is for men who have their way to make that bone and muscle, an iron will, a ready wit, are needful ; and all the fields you have surveyed, all the broad meadows, all the rich pastures, came to him, not because of the strength of his own right hand, or because of the capacity of his own brain, but simply because his father had owned Berrie Down Hollow before him, and left it to his eldest son.

'What could any human being desire more ?' friend and stranger, looking over the property, were wont mentally to ask themselves ; for the world knew that Squire Dudley was a dissatisfied and discontented man.

He had youth, strength, health, a happy home, a devoted wife—what more could any rational being ask of Heaven ? What could the skeleton be which walked with Arthur Dudley under the elms, and across the meadows, or beside the brook ? This was the question every person who met the Squire, even for the first time, put to those who knew him best. His manifest discontent inspired a certain curiosity in the mind of each individual who looked in his handsome, effeminate face. He had a certain grace of manner and lazy elegance of movement which attracted attention to him, and caused many eye-glasses to be directed towards the good-looking stranger in various assemblies in London to which he had the entrée. He was not a bad man in any relation of life. He

was a gentleman by birth, education, and taste ; and yet in his own neighbourhood Squire Dudley was not popular. His skeleton was too apparent, and people rather disliked one who had not mental strength enough to shake off the depressing influence of such a companion.

‘Have your closets full of bones and bodies at home, if you will,’ says society ; ‘but for Heaven’s sake do not carry them about in the sunlight on your back. Weep your tears an’ you like to do so ; but get through the ceremony in private. We have, every one of us, our troubles, yet we do not proclaim them aloud from the house-tops. We demand that if, either from choice or necessity, a man fast, he shall not appear in public with a sad countenance, but that he shall “anoint his head and wash his face,” and bear his trouble bravely and with good courage.’

Virtually those were the words his neighbours addressed to Squire Dudley. Not for his skeleton did the world forsake him, but only because he had not courage to turn and grapple with it, and either lay the ghost, or shut it up in one chamber at home.

And, after all, it was such a commonplace ghost ! If your curiosity be at all excited about the matter, in the next chapter you shall see its face.

CHAPTER II.

SQUIRE DUDLEY.

ARTHUR DUDLEY, ESQUIRE, of Berrie Down Hollow, in the parish of Fifield, Hertfordshire, was in the habit of informing all those whom the intelligence might, and a great number whom it might not, concern, that he had, to borrow his own expression, ‘missed his life.’ And, as is usual with men who employ such a phrase, he imagined the miss had been in fortune, not in himself.

He had lost, he felt satisfied, not for want of skill in playing his game, but because the game of life was an unfair one, in which the

cards were packed, and all the trumps dealt to one man, while all the low, poor, insignificant, valueless bits of pasteboard were left for another, in which from birth all the odds were against one player, while the stakes were thrust, *volens volens*, into his opponent's hand.

It is a nice, contented, comforting, reassuring creed this for any human being to hold. It makes a man utterly dissatisfied with his lot; while it leaves him only too well satisfied with himself. He is, so he thinks, as competent to take his leaps as the best in the land; and when in succession he misses every one, he still believes it was only the fault of the steed he rode, of the groom who did not girth his horse tight enough, of the saddler who sent him in reins which broke in his fingers, of the nature of the ground, of the labourer who staked the hedge, of the proprietor who wire-fenced the field.

Other men go flying over every obstacle, and gallop past him to the goal all are striving to reach, while he labours wearily after, or lies maimed and shattered beside the first gate. Yet, mark you, this is never his fault; it is his 'cursed luck,' to quote Arthur Dudley over again.

Providence, in his inmost heart the Squire considered, had a spite against him from his mother's womb, and consequently, and by reason only of this injustice on the part of Providence, he failed where others succeeded.

In the world's great workshop he was a very bad workman, and, accordingly, he was eternally complaining of his tools. His fellows moved up in the social scale, but he never rose a step higher. With a rusty nail one picked the lock of Fortune's treasure casket; but then, as Arthur Dudley truly observed, *that* rusty nail never came into his hands. With sledge and hammer, and file and chisel, common drudges, as they seemed to him, bought their estates and took rank in the country.

His schoolfellows—mere idiots he had thought some of them then—mere idiots, indeed, he thought them still—had climbed great parts of the steep hill of worldly success, and were talked of as rising men in the pulpit, at the bar, in the hospitals, in literature, science, and art.

There was Holland, for instance, who went with him to Oxford. Well, Holland had no brains, any more than most of the people Squire Dudley knew, and yet he had somehow obtained a capital post under Government, lived at the West End, and had married a beautiful young widow with, rumour said, many thousands a year.

There was Morris, also, a man without a sixpence, without appearance, connection, manner, friends, or father or mother to speak of, and yet he, even he—. But it is useless to continue the catalogue.

Fate had helped every one, except Squire Dudley, on in the world, and Squire Dudley did not in the least believe that every man's Nemesis is himself.

Berrie Down Hollow, however, bore no traces of belonging to a person who held this peculiar doctrine regarding his own life. There was no disorder, no neglect. When once the gates swung back, friend and stranger alike beheld a place which was kept as well as Kemms' Park:—where no weeds grew on the walks; where the grass was like a bowling-green; where crocuses and snowdrops filled the flower-beds in the early part of the year; where there was a blaze of scarlet geraniums, and a brilliant decking of white, and red, and purple verbena, of petunias and gladioli, lobelias, and all other plants that make our beautiful English summer more beautiful still.

Never a litter of dead leaves was there about those walks; never a gate hung loose for want of hinge or screw; never a thing was left undone that willing hands could speedily put to rights; and yet there was an indescribable look of shortness of money, both within and without the dwelling, which those who were in the secrets of the family knew was attributable to absolute pecuniary poverty; for, although Arthur Dudley owned house and lands, stock and well-filled barns, he was poor as a gentleman with such possessions could be.

And that was where the shoe pinched Squire Dudley. He had money's worth, but not money. He paid no rent; he killed his fatted calves and his prime Southdowns; he brewed his own ale; his fowls were duly trussed for his table; he ate of the produce

of his own lands, and drank of the only vintages English fields will yield ; he had his goodly orchard, and his fair flower-gardens ; he had his horses in the stable, and his colts running loose in the paddock ; he had his broad meadows, and his rich pastures ; he had still a young wife, and two children ; he had sinned no grievous sin ; he had no secret he feared being brought to light, yet he had 'missed his life.' So he said, so his friends said, and the reason for this unusual unanimity of opinion chanced to be that he had no money.

'Arthur was born to be a rich man,' said the elders among his kith and kin ; but if Nature had intended any such beneficial arrangement in his behalf, she frustrated her own design by permitting him to be born in the wrong house, and amongst the wrong people, and with the wrong temperament for much good fortune to befall him.

After all, Nature does make these little mistakes occasionally, and each man and woman amongst the unsuccessful thinks he or she could have managed matters infinitely better for himself or herself, if only the disposition of affairs had been left in the hands of the person interested.

Squire Dudley thought so, at any rate. He bore a grudge against Nature for having spoiled his worldly chances, which grudge he paid with interest to Nature's representatives on earth—his fellow-creatures.

Had he been born at Kemms' Park, with the typical silver spoon in his mouth, he would, doubtless, have proved a very charming member of society. As it was, he had fallen into the habit of quarrelling with the bread and butter fate had provided for him, to such a degree that there was not a labourer on his farm, a servant in his house, a friend he possessed in the world, who would have borne with Arthur Dudley's dissatisfied temper, his discontent, and his complainings, had it not been for the sake of his wife, who was the only person on earth who thoroughly and devotedly, and believingly and disinterestedly, loved the young Squire.

Matrimonially, luck had not been against him. If the chances of marriage be but as one eel to a bagfull of snakes, many a man,

who thrust his hands into that lottery after Arthur Dudley, must have had cause to lament his evil fortune.

Matrimonially the Squire, who had otherwise 'missed his life,' had done well, so the world thought at least; but then this was one of the many questions of which Arthur Dudley secretly joined issue with the world.

In the experiences of his earlier manhood there had been certain love passages between himself and a handsome young heiress, whom it was the wish of his aunt, Miss Alethea Hope, that he should marry.

Then visions of a life worth living, of a position worth having, beatified the dreariness of the Squire's prosaic existence. Like all men who are utterly dissatisfied with their position, he permitted hope to tell him many a flattering tale, which had not the slightest shadow of a foundation in truth. Indeed, in the management of his farm, Arthur Dudley was but as a reed shaken by the wind of whatever fancy whispered to him over-night; and it was natural enough that, when wandering about the grounds of Copt Hall, with his first real love—worth five thousand a-year and expectations—he should dream of a social position unenjoyed by the Dudleys for many a year; of a town house; of Berrie Down Hollow filled with grand company; of taking rank in the county; of, perhaps, tacking M.P. to the end of his name.

The future, then, seemed as full of promise to him as the old gardens at Copt Hall of roses. Can you wonder? Youth was at the helm and Pleasure at the prow, and an heiress about to become a passenger for the voyage of life; a handsome heiress too—graceful and accomplished, and much sought after, by reason not merely of her wealth, but of her beauty.

Among the roses at Copt Hall she promised to marry Squire Dudley, and yet before the roses were in bloom again she had consented to make another 'happy.'

That was the first serious accident which befell the young man's life-boat; and he retired to Berrie Down Hollow, feeling he had been jilted, not merely by his lady-love, but by the jade Fortune.

It is true, I suppose, that, if the cause of the mental death or

paralysis of any man's life be closely inquired into, a woman will prove to have been at the bottom of the apparent mystery.

Directly or indirectly, white soft hands fill the cup, either with strengthening wine, or pure water, or the drugged liquor, that steals the strength away, and impairs the finest genius.

Those from whom we expected the greatest results go to their long sleep, and leave no mark behind by which their fellows shall remember them ; and why ? because, although they had the power to achieve much, some woman prevented their doing anything.

The obstacle, which at one point or other threw them off the rails, wore petticoats, be certain. Either they did not get the right women, or they married the wrong ones. Somewhere there was a story in their lives ; ay, and it may be a tragedy too. Adam, one might have thought, considering the circumstances of his marriage, had a fair chance of happiness ; and yet, see what a mess Eve made of his prospects. Since which time to the present it may fairly be questioned whether any man has ever chosen the proper help-meet ; whether in effect even the Adams of the nineteenth century are not originally placed in a paradise, out of which, in due time, some woman contrives to lead them. Whether or not his matrimonial disappointment really was the cause of Squire Dudley's ill success, one thing is undeniable, viz., that he, in his heart, attributed much of his subsequent bad fortune to it. Such natures are not, perhaps, capable of any great degree of passionate attachment ; and, however unromantic the statement may sound, I am bound to confess it was never the woman he regretted so much as the heiress.

Arabella's raven tresses never appeared before his mental vision with one-half the same frequency as did her gold. When he failed to dig nuggets out of Berrie Down Hollow, he reflected sorrowfully on the faithless fair's five thousand a-year.

Had he married another woman with money, there can be little doubt but that then he would have thought disconsolately about Miss Laxton's face, Miss Laxton's perfections ; as it was, want of money being the one most pressing evil in his life, Cupid folded his wings and perched on one of the elm-trees, laughing to him-

self, no doubt, while Mammon walked with Squire Dudley up and down the meadows and across the lea.

Passionately, perhaps, as he ever loved any woman, Arthur loved the stately fair whom he had wooed in the old-fashioned gardens at Copt Hall. She was his style of beauty; his ideal of feminine perfection; haughty and queenlike; capricious and fanciful; strong-willed and domineering; a woman to rule slaves—to govern so feeble and purposeless a nature as his, despotically. Had all things gone well, she would, as Miss Hope declared, have ‘ruled the roast’ at Berrie Down; she would have been mistress and master too; she would have led him a pleasant life of it in the old Hertfordshire home; she would have taught him meekness and submission, and it may be contentment also, for some men are like children, better satisfied when a strong hand guides their course. As it was, the years had gone by, leaving Squire Dudley intensely dissatisfied with all mundane arrangements, particularly with those arrangements which affected himself.

And yet any other person might have made a good thing out of his life. There was the rub! The owner of Berrie Down Hollow wanted not to make good things, but to have good things made for him; and it was for this the world quarrelled with Arthur Dudley.

‘Hang the man,’ said Compton Raidsford, who was worth half a million of money, and had worked for every sixpence of it. ‘A dissatisfied idiot. Has not he got Berrie Down, the sweetest place in the county, and, confound him, has he not got the sweetest wife, too?’

Which statements might be perfectly true, and yet hold no comfort for the possessor of place or wife. What was the use of Berrie Down without money to keep the estate properly; and what to such a man was the good of having a wife with whom even he could find no fault, unless, indeed, it might be, that she was a trifle too sweet—too perfect?

After all, it is scarcely pleasant to discover, when you have thought to make a woman supremely happy, that the world will persist in thinking it is the woman who is making you happy.

This was an idea hurtful to Arthur Dudley in the extreme, and those who loved his wife best discovered in due time that the

greatest kindness any friend could do her was to refrain from speaking to her husband of the blessing he possessed.

And yet Arthur Dudley was by no means either unamiable or ungenerous. He was not a bad man; he was only that which oftentimes produces infinitely worse results, a weak one; he was not cruel, nor wicked, nor wanton, nor wasteful. He had no sins, but he had many grievous faults. He was a man going to the dogs as fast as bad management could take him, when he married his wife; and when we enter the gates of Berrie Down Hollow he is a man going to the dogs more slowly, but not less surely still.

Every one knew that his wife was the drag on the wheels of his descent. Every person was fully aware that whatever of comfort and happiness, and real respectability, his life had held, was due to her beneficent influence; and under this knowledge Squire Dudley himself chafed secretly. Had she been an ill-tempered shrew; had she been an idle, flaunting, extravagant, wasteful woman; had she drank; had she been a confirmed invalid; had she been a loud-talking, boastful, hard, managing semi-man; had she been anything, indeed, but what she was, her husband would have had a grievance and rested satisfied. As it was, he himself could not have told what his feeling was towards her. He did not love her much, and yet she loved him exceedingly. He did not consider her at all, and yet, from sunrise to sunset, her first thought was how to benefit and pleasure him.

She had set up an idol for herself, and fell down and worshipped it; and, as is not unusual in such cases, the idol half despised her for her pains.

At the bottom of his heart, his idea about her was the same as his idea about Berrie Down Hollow.

No doubt the thing was very good; but let a thing be ever so good, if it be not the thing you want—what then? Why, then you are apt to look with a little disfavour and petulance upon it, even though it be perfect of its kind—a diamond without speck or flaw.

And besides, his marriage had not quite answered his expectations; that match, indeed, had needed to be made in a dozen

heavens which would have satisfied the expectations of Squire Dudley.

A good wife, a clever manager, a home-loving woman, she was to put all crooked things straight, and to put all straight things straighter! The Dudley millennium, a reign of utter order and of utter peace, was to come to Berrie Down with the young wife. He told her all his difficulties, and she promised hopefully to help him through them. He announced to all his friends that, 'once he was married,' he should get on; and his friends, to a certain extent, believed him, for they knew a mistress to be sorely needed at Berrie Down House, 'where everything is going to wreck and ruin,' he stated to his fiancée, who, in due time, verified the truth of his assertion, and bravely put her shoulder to the wheel, to prevent such a consummation.

'I have to clothe, educate, and maintain five brothers and sisters,' he declared with that frankness concerning his grievances which was a distinguishing feature of his character, and, although his future wife looked a little horror-stricken at this revelation, yet she adventured amongst those brothers and sisters cheerfully, and, without a murmur, cast in her lot with theirs.

How much of her happiness, during the early years of her married experience, she owed to that young life, Mrs Dudley never stopped to analyze; but there were those who knew that Berry Down would have been a terrible home for Arthur's wife, had bright faces not grown brighter at her approach, had strong willing hands not been stretched out to smooth her way, to make her difficult path easy.

She would have found out all her husband's faults in six months had she been thrown solely on his society during that period; as it was, she had always something else to think about—something to step between her and knowledge. She was sorry for him, and she was sorry for the 'children,' as she called them. It was hard for him, and it was hard for them; and the dear hands were always laid entreatingly on some half-turned pettish shoulder, and the dear voice was ever engaged in soothing the effect of sharp and hasty words; for Heather Dudley was essentially a peace-maker, a woman whose mission it seemed to turn away wrath, to bind up

bleeding wounds, to assuage with ointment the irritation of long-standing sores.

With Heather no man quarrelled, and no woman either. She was not a good hater ; she had never sounded the depths of a great sorrow nor of a great passion. Like many women who marry very young, even love had come to her mildly. The disease taken in youth is never so fierce as that which attacks the patient in maturity ; as is the strength, so is the day ; as are the years, so is the joy and the agony. She was wooed and married ! smoother never ran the course of true love. On neither side was there one to interpose an obstacle, or to prevent either following the road inclination pointed out. She was a woman 'without a story,' without any previous attachment—without a wrong, a grief, a remorse, a regret. Crime was to her an awful and abstract mystery, which existed only in the police-reports, and as a secret, low-whispered, in some unhappy families. Of the world, she knew nothing : of its wickedness, of its temptations, of its pleasures, of its sorrows, she was innocent as her own children. She had plumbed the depth of no human joy or grief. Through the meadows the rivulet of her life had flowed peacefully and monotonously. Vaguely she understood that there were different existences, that there were other lands, through which swept rivers, broad and deep and dark, in the depths whereof lay wrecked hopes and terrible memories ; she had heard of existences lost on those great streams, of corpses which the currents carried down to the vast ocean ; she vaguely comprehended that there were rapids and pools, contrary currents, cruel storms, to be encountered by some human ships, but it was all vague to her—vague as the story in a book.

She had experienced trouble, but only such trouble as comes with the morning, the clouds and mists whereof vanish under the beams of the mid-day sun. Of that different sorrow which falls on humanity when the darkness of evening is closing upon man's onward course, when there is no noon-day to follow, and only the night left in which to travel darkly, her life held no knowledge. She was like Berrie Down Hollow, sweet, natural, unaffected ; and Berrie Down would have seemed strange without her, while she

might, at a first introduction, scarcely have seemed so entirely in keeping with any place away from Berrie Down.

She was the sun of that house, at any rate; even Arthur knew things were 'never the same' when she went visiting; and, at the moment I ask you to look out on the view from the drawing-room windows of Berrie Down Hollow, you may see the Squire seated under the shade of a chestnut-tree, reading the *Times*, and inwardly chafing over his wife's absence, and wondering whether, for certain, she will return from London that evening, and bring Mrs Ormson with her.

Mr Dudley likes Mrs Ormson, and he does not much like her daughter Bessie, an exceedingly pretty girl, who sits on the turf at his feet, spelling the other side of the sheet, resting her round cheek on her hand the while.

All the young Dudleys, his brothers and sisters, his own son and his own daughter, were harmless in comparison to Bessie Ormson, who had a will of her own which she asserted, and opinions of her own which she stuck to, and who was staying at Berrie Down for a couple of months, as though, Squire Dudley remarked to his wife, 'the house had not enough people in it without her.'

CHAPTER III.

THE FAMILY HISTORY.

IF Berrie Down 'had enough people in it without Miss Ormson,' Squire Dudley could scarcely in common justice lay the blame at any other door than his own, considering that of his own free will he had at a comparatively early period of his and their lives encumbered himself with the maintenance of five half-brothers and sisters, which fact it was impossible either for him or them to forget, seeing never a day passed that he did not rehearse to some one how this charge had crippled and kept him back in life.

‘Other men,’ he declared, ‘found it hard enough to maintain wife and family of their own ; but here was he, provided by his own father with a family large enough to drag down any man.’

‘It is a comfort your stepmother married, at all events, Arthur,’ observed Miss Ormson, ‘or you would have been in the workhouse long ago. The last straw, is it not so ? you dear grumbling old camel.’

And that was all the sympathy *he* got. Can it be wondered at, therefore, if Squire Dudley thought every man’s hand was raised against him ?

To explain Miss Ormson’s speech, it is, however, necessary to enter into a slight history of the Dudley family, who had really owned Berrie Down for more years than any person believed, and were stated by tradition to have been great people at an indefinitely remote period, when the father of the first Lord Kemms was a goldsmith in the City, lending money to grateful princes, who, contrary to all Solomon’s experience, proved themselves worthy of the trust.

From that time until the day when this story commences, the Dudleys had been Dudleys of Berrie Down ; but, unhappily, while the trading Baldwins were making, the aristocratic Dudleys were spending, and thus it came to pass that each successive owner of Berrie Down left not merely that place, but also less money, to the man who came after him than his predecessor had done.

Accordingly, in the course of many deceases and successions, the money dwindled down to nothing.

When there was not a shilling left beyond whatever amount the land might produce to keep up the family dignity, Berrie Down descended to Major Dudley, Arthur’s father, who, on the strength of his landed property, half-pay, handsome face, and good address, married first, Janet, third daughter of Arthur Hope, Esquire, of Copt Hall, Essex, who was possessed of a moderate fortune, and a still more moderate show of good looks, and who brought one son, the Arthur of my story, into the world ; and secondly, when Arthur had attained the age of seventeen, Laura, daughter of Maddox Cuthbert, silk merchant, Manchester warehouseman, and alderman in the city of London.

Miss Cuthbert, it was supposed, would have money on her father's death ; but that supposition proved so utterly incorrect, that the only dowry the second Mrs Dudley brought her husband resolved itself into a pretty face and five children.

How many more arrows, male and female, might have been thrust into the Dudley quiver, had Major Dudley not opportunely retired into the family vault, situate in Fifield churchyard, was a question Arthur Dudley declared only the Lord above could answer. As things fell out, however, no more sons or daughters came to the Hollow, while to Arthur descended the family estate and his mother's small fortune, which latter barely sufficed to pay the debts Major Dudley left behind him. On the other hand, Mrs Dudley No. 2 found, when her husband died, that she had nothing to begin the world again upon excepting the dowry, afore honourably mentioned, of good looks—somewhat the worse for wear—and five children, whose ages ranged from nine years old downwards.

At this period Arthur Dudley was seven-and-twenty, and master of the position.

He could have turned his stepmother and her family adrift on the world ; but, instead of doing so, he adopted his brothers and sisters and his father's widow, who, three years after old Squire Dudley's death, made a second very poor investment of her good looks, and married, greatly to Arthur's chagrin, a Doctor Marsden, possessed of a very small practice in one of the London suburbs. This gentleman fancied Mrs Dudley would make him a good managing wife, and was also under the delusion that her family—people known and respected within sound of Bow bells—might prove useful to him and advance his prospects.

Those were the days in which the young Squire was spending much time at Copt Hall, wooing his heiress. Those were the days in which he thought 'The Hollow' might be converted into a great place ; in which he looked at life through rose-tinted glass ; in which he believed he could afford to be both proud and generous—for all of which reasons, and also because he did not choose that his father's children should be beholden for anything to a 'trumpery apothecary,' he took upon himself the burden of

feeding, boarding, and educating five sturdy and rebellious juvenile Dudleys.

For this act of liberality, society generally patted him on the back, and said he was a fine fellow. Had he turned the children of his father's second marriage out of the gates of Berrie Down Hollow, society, on the other hand, would have remembered that *he* had got the property, while the younger children were left penniless, and rated him for his inhumanity accordingly ; but, as matters stood, every one in the first blush of the affair forgot this fact, and pronounced Arthur to be the most generous fellow in the universe.

And so, theoretically, perhaps he was ; just one of those men who will give an old horse the run of his paddock, but refuse to pay five shillings a week for his run in the paddock of any other person.

Nevertheless, he shared with his brothers and sisters the produce of his fields, the fat of his pastures, and for two years more they roamed wild about Berrie Down—a troop of hardy young colts, unbroken, untrained, uneducated, uncared-for.

The most enthusiastic American could have desired no more complete democracy than the household at 'The Hollow,' where, as is usual in all democracies, the classes governed in other communities, were rulers of the place.

At their own sweet wills, the servants went and came ; by fits and starts the labourers hedged and ditched, and ploughed and sowed. When it pleased them to do so, the younger Dudleys assembled at the presumed meal hours ; when the fancy took them to do otherwise, they carried their luncheon and dinner away to remote parts of the farm, or feasted in kitchen and dairy on their return.

In vain, friends and even acquaintances entered remonstrances concerning the manners, habits, and appearance of the unkempt, untaught, uncared-for, romping, impudent, mischievous young gipsies at 'The Hollow.' Even the two smallest of the band, a boy and girl, twins, only seven years of age, were, so the Rector of Fifield assured Arthur, going headlong to destruction. Robbing birds'-nests, pelting ducks, stealing fruit, trampling down the ripe

grain, climbing trees, wading in the brook, setting terriers on cats, chasing sheep, jeering at the passers-by, these children, the good man declared, in all such occupations were not alone. Wherever they went, Satan accompanied them; and having arrived at this pleasant conclusion, it was only natural he should, even with tears in his eyes, entreat Arthur to stretch forth his hand and save the little ones from being lost, body and soul.

The opinion of the Rector, modified to a certain extent, was the opinion of the neighbourhood generally.

Since time began, such a lot of bright-eyed, fearless, active, unmanageable young 'limbs' had never, so the country-people declared, been seen in Hertfordshire. They were at once the terror and admiration of all who frequented the roads and lanes round Berrie Down. Keen of tongue, swift of foot, careless of danger, the children roamed o'er common and lea and field. They were to be met with in the woods that lay westward of the Hollow, watching the squirrels, and almost emulating their agility. As for the miller, he declared his heart was always in his mouth, thinking some of them would be drowned. When the mowers were at work, at the risk of their legs the children followed close, hoping to rifle the cornerake's nest; when the wheat-stacks were moved, the five were always at hand to hiss on the terriers, to prevent either rat or mouse effecting its escape. They stayed with the threshers in the barn; they were here, there, everywhere; they chased the calves, they milked the cows, they rode the horses; they were a herd of sunburnt, freckled, bold, romping, cruel and yet tender-hearted boys and girls, who made bitter lamentation over the death of a favourite rabbit, although they robbed nests, and carried off young birds, and tormented cats, and utterly detested vermin and all creeping reptiles; and scandalized at the fact of five such natures 'running to waste,'—so society phrased it,—people urged upon their brother the desirability of some alteration being effected in his establishment.

All in vain. Squire Dudley, the heiress' hope having vanished, cursed his luck audibly, but refused to attempt to mend it.

'Send them to school, indeed,' he said to Mrs Ormson, the second Mrs Dudley's eldest sister—'send them to school! I have

trouble enough now to make both ends meet, without increasing my expenses.'

'Why do you not marry, then?' she asked; in reply to which inquiry Arthur Dudley only shook his head. He had been disappointed in his matrimonial schemes, and the world just then looked very black to him.

'Unless a wife brought something in her hand towards keeping herself,' he observed at length, 'I am afraid that remedy would prove worse than the disease.'

'Nonsense!' retorted Mrs Ormson, decidedly. 'A wife would very soon set things to rights, prevent waste, see that the people you employ did their duty, and keep the children in order. You want a managing woman at the head of your establishment. If my hands were not so tied, I would remain and look after matters for you myself.'

'I wish you would,' sighed Arthur; and he was in earnest; for there were two people on earth in whom he believed—one, Mrs Ormson, 'a most superior woman,' and the other an old house-keeper who had lived at Berrie Down Hollow in the better days, when Mrs Dudley No. 1 was alive, who had packed up and departed when the advent of Mrs Dudley No. 2 was announced, but who still came occasionally to see him, and lament over 'Master Arthur's evil fortune in having all those owdacious boys and girls cast like mites into the family treasury.'

'You are quite right, Piggot,' said Mrs Ormson, to whom, in a moment of forgetfulness, the woman once confided this opinion; 'for the children are indeed a widow's mites. Your remark does credit alike to your wit and to your scriptural knowledge.'

'I reads my Bible, mum,' observed Piggott, who had a secret distrust of Mrs Ormson.

'A very proper thing for a person in your station,' returned the lady. 'I always like servants who read their Bible. It teaches them honesty, and prevents their striving to be equal with their masters and mistresses. Reading the Scriptures has made you the invaluable woman you are, Piggott. I only wish poor Mr Arthur had some one like you to manage his house for him. Do you think he could not make it worth your while to—?'

‘Thank you, mum,’ interrupted Mrs Piggott, hastily ; ‘but I would rather be excused. Master Arthur, mum, was good enough to wish me to come and take the management, after his step-mamma’s marriage ; but a parcel of young children is a thing as I never was accustomed to.’ And although Mrs Piggott was too polite to add anything in disparagement of Mrs Ormson’s nephews and nieces, still there was a look in her face which that lady rightly interpreted to mean, ‘More especially such a set of romping, mischievous, riotous, ill-conditioned young imps as there are in this house.’

After that, Mrs Ormson abandoned all idea of a housekeeper for Arthur.

‘Your case is a hard one, Arthur, I fear,’ she said, ‘when even Piggott will not help you out of your scrape. Clearly you must marry—let me look out a wife for you. I know so many nice girls, suitable in every respect, and several with money too. You know you ought to marry a rich woman, that is, if you can get one to marry you.’

‘There’s the difficulty,’ remarked Arthur, thinking of the faithless heiress.

‘Well, let me see what I can do,’ implored Mrs Ormson, who devoutly believed the Almighty had sent her into the world to set right the things He had unintentionally left wrong at the creation. ‘When are you coming to London?’

‘Next month ; to stay a day or two with Dick Travers.’

‘Then give me a day or two at the same time, and, before the summer is over, there will be a mistress at Berrie Down. Mark my words.’

Whether Squire Dudley marked her words may be doubted ; but he verified them, in a manner Mrs Ormson little anticipated, by going to Dick Travers’, by being persuaded to accompany that gentleman to visit his aunt, Mrs Travers, ‘who has three pretty daughters, and a niece staying with her ; the finest girl I ever saw,’ finished Mr Richard Travers. ‘No nonsense about her ; up to everything—ready for anything. Can make a dress, and dance in it afterwards ; sit up all night with the old lady, and come down to breakfast next morning fresh as a daisy. Just the girl I’d marry,

if I could scrape together money enough to buy the license ; but she is too poor for me, Dudley, or for you either, for that matter. A wife with only a few hundreds is a luxury only to be indulged in by a very rich man.'

'She comes of good people,' he went on,—'the Bells of Layford. They have money among them, though, I am sorry to say, but little of it has fallen to her share. More's the pity ! Daughter of the late Rector of Layford—mother dead also—two sisters in heaven with father and mother—not an incumbrance of any kind. Well, it is of no use ; you cannot afford it, I suppose, any more than I can.'

'I cannot,' agreed Arthur Dudley, as gravely as though Mr Travers had made some serious proposition to him ; and then straight away he went and did the very thing he had said in all earnestness he could not afford.

She struck his fancy—that pretty girl with the quaint name ; sweet Heather Bell, as Mr Travers always called her.

'The name was a fancy of her godfather, an eccentric bachelor,' the lady explained. 'She was the youngest of three daughters, and the other two were christened, respectfully, "Lily" and "Rose." "Call this one 'Heather,'" said Mr Stewart, who loved Scotland and her purple mountains ; "she will grow up like the heather, perhaps—strong, hardy, a wild flower, worth a hundred of your garden rarities. Call her Heather, and I will remember her name to her advantage." So she was christened Heather,' went on Mrs Travers, 'and she lived and grew up as you see, while the two other daughters drooped and died. Unhappily, soon after her birth, Mr Bell quarrelled with her godfather, who has since utterly ignored Heather's existence. It is a pretty name for a girl ; don't you think so, Mr Dudley ?'

Mr Dudley did, and thought, moreover, that Heather was considerably prettier than her name, influenced by which opinion he went again and again to London, and betook himself day after day to Mrs Travers' pleasant house, where he found order and competence, bright faces, and always a cordial welcome.

After the riot and confusion at the Hollow, that well-arranged house seemed to Arthur a sort of earthly heaven.

In comparison with the Traverses', Mrs Ormson's nice young ladies seemed a little affected and self-conscious ; and, therefore, during the course of his frequent visits to London, he proved rather negligent of his relative.

The Misses Travers were all engaged : one to a north country baronet, another to a barrister, the third to a reverend gentleman, who was subsequently appointed bishop somewhere at the world's end. Miss Bell, however, was heart-whole, and Mrs Travers, who laboured in common with many other people under a delusion with regard to Arthur Dudley's worldly means, never wearied of singing her niece's praises in the ears of the young Squire. What a daughter she had been—what a wife she would make—what a treasure she had proved during the whole of her (Mrs Travers') illness !

'When the dear girls were married,' Mrs Travers went on to hope, 'she trusted Heather would be thrown into society where she would meet with a husband worthy of her.'

All of which made the man to whom she spoke eager to win the girl for himself ; and accordingly, to cut a long story short, before the summer was over Mrs Ormson's prediction was verified by Miss Bell and her poor little fortune of six hundred pounds becoming the property of Arthur Dudley, Esquire, of Berrie Down Hollow, to have and to hold for ever.

By degrees that gentleman had worked himself up into the belief that the day of his wedding would prove the turning-point in his luck. What benefits he expected fate would present him with on the occasion of his marriage it would be difficult to say ; but certainly he thought there were long arrears of forgotten gifts owing to him that might be gracefully paid by Providence on so auspicious an occasion.

For some inscrutable reason, however, Providence decided on still remaining Arthur Dudley's debtor. His lands yielded no double crops ; he found it unnecessary to build larger barns for the produce of his fields ; his oxen were not stronger to labour, and his sheep did not bring forth thousands and tens of thousands on the green slopes of Berrie Down.

His life continued to be still a 'miss,' money grew no more

pientiful, his stock failed to increase ; in-doors, indeed, there was comfort and regularity ; but what signified in-door comfort to a man who had hoped to represent the county, and to stand on an equal footing with Lord Kemms ?

No longer, certainly, were the younger Dudleys a terror to the neighbourhood, a vision of very horror to cat, and bird, and beast ; but while they had to be clothed and maintained, where was there cause for gratulation ? Worst of all, no one, except Mrs Ormson, sympathized with him save Heather ; and even Heather laboured under the delusion that she was bound to sympathize with other people besides her husband.

After seven years of marriage, Squire Dudley gratefully decided, in his inmost heart, that he ought to have remained single, and, leaving Berrie Down, gone forth into the world to push his fortune.

What, perhaps, established him in this opinion was the contemplation of Compton Raidsford's great house on the road to South Kemms.

From the drawing-room windows of Berrie Down Hollow he could see that bran-new mansion staring him in the face. It stood on a slight hill, beyond the mill, over the fields, across the road, and then over more fields ; but still he could see it, and, when the wind was from the west, hear the sound of the gong which announced to all whom the intelligence might interest that the Raidsfords were about to sit down to luncheon or dinner, as the case might be.

If a man like Compton Raidsford, who had risen from the ranks, could make money enough in London to build such a palace, and to keep it up when built, what might not Arthur Dudley have achieved ?

With all the veins of his heart the Squire hated the merchant who drove off to Palinsbridge in his carriage and pair, and rode out with his daughters, who sat their horses, so Arthur affirmed, with as much grace and elegance as sacks of sand.

It was well known that Mr Raidsford had started in life as boy in the workshop of Messrs Fairland and Wright, engineers, Stan-gate, at the moderate salary of five shillings per week ; and per-

haps the only speech Bessie Ormson ever made, which thoroughly met with Squire Dudley's approval, was the rather ill-natured one, that 'most probably Mr Raidsford preferred a gong to a bell, on account of early associations connected with the latter.'

'It would have been a fine thing for me, Bessie, if *I* had sprung from the gutter, with no absurd social conventionalities keeping *me* back,' he sighed; in answer to which remark, Bessie Ormson only shrugged her shoulders and pulled a little grimace.

The man who could not achieve success at Berrie Down Hollow was not likely in Miss Ormson's opinion, to have ever reared Mr Raidsford's palace out of five shillings a week; and, as a rule, she was in no way backward about expressing this conviction. For which reason—although she was extremely pretty, and had higher spirits and more life about her than any other guest who ever came to stay at Berrie Down—Mr Dudley could very well have dispensed with her presence.

More especially at the juncture when you, reader, are invited to walk across the lawn, sloping away from the drawing-room windows to the Hollow—for Heather had then been absent from home for nearly a fortnight, staying with Mrs Marsden, whose health was anything but satisfactory—and during the whole of that time the house had been, in Arthur's opinion, at sixes and sevens, and Mr Dudley's personal comforts somewhat neglected.

All of which formed a text from which Bessie preached a sermon—always beginning, never ending—on the difference of Berrie Down with and without a mistress.

'I never believed the woman lived who could make me agree with Solomon, till I met your wife, Arthur,' she said.

'What do you mean?' he asked.

'That I am certain now of the truth of that which he never could have known from his own experience, that a woman may be to her husband, "Far Above Rubies."'

'Humph!' ejaculated Squire Dudley; and went out, disgusted with Bessie, the wisest of men, and the world in general.

CHAPTER IV.

HEATHER.

LET me place the picture of Berrie Down before you once again, before proceeding with my story.

In the stillness of the summer evening, look upon Arthur Dudley's home, as the few passers-by pause occasionally to gaze, so that you may stamp the stage and its accessories on your memory ere the characters I would group together come prominently forward, and commence acting the unexciting story it is proposed to tell.

There is the house, with its many windows festooned by westeria and clematis, roses and magnolia; the house, with its red-tiled roof, with its grotesque chimneys, with its cheerful drawing-room, with its sunny bed-chambers. There is the lawn, smooth-shaven and green, on which the sunlight falls in broad, golden patches, sloping down sharply to the Hollow, where the blackberry-bushes, and the broom, and the low underwood, form a mass of tangled wildness. Beyond there is the stream, and a little to the left Mr Scrotter's modest flour-mill; then come fields, where cows are lying and sheep browsing, and away in the distance stands Mr Raidsford's mansion, with trees about it—trees that are merged in, and seem to form a part of, the woods and plantations surrounding Kemms' Park.

The lawn at Berrie Down is studded with fine old timber. Through the air pigeons are wheeling, on the ridge-tiles they are cooing; two or three dogs are lying basking in the sun; at one of the open windows of the drawing-room a cat is seated, gravely surveying the landscape, and perhaps at the same time prospectively viewing supper, or retrospectively thinking of her latest depredations in the dairy. There is a great peace in the scene—a peace which it requires a person to have been out in the hurry and turmoil of the world fully to comprehend. There is a repose in the landscape: in the way the sunbeams fall and rest upon the grass; in the monotonous cooing of the pigeons; in the attitudes

of the cattle ; in the murmur of the stream ; in the stillness of the mill ; in the faint rustling of the leaves ; in the very perfume of the flowers ; in the soft fanning of the breeze ; in the grouping of the human figures in the landscape.

It would be a scene that for you, friend, and you, worn and weary with the noise and rush and excitement of this great Babylon—where we are all speeding so fast through life—to look upon with longing gaze, to remember afterwards with aching hearts ; but people in the country view these things otherwise, and, accordingly, it was with far different feeling to any you would experience at sight of such a sunset, that Squire Dudley occasionally lifted his eyes to look towards the glowing west, ere dropping them again on the *Times*, the news in which Miss Ormson, seated on the ground at his feet, was kind enough to share with him.

Over the grass were scattered five other Dudleys, ranging in age from fifteen years upwards ; one of whom, Alick, came up to his brother, and interrupted his study of the price of shares with—

‘ I wonder what time mother will get home ; have you really no idea by which train she is coming ? ’

‘ Not the slightest,’ said Arthur, laying down his paper, somewhat to the discomfiture of the young lady, who had been interesting herself with an ‘ Extraordinary Elopement ’ paragraph ; ‘ and how often, Alick, am I to tell you not to call Heather ‘ mother.’ It is not enough that I have to support you all, but you must persist in calling my wife, who is almost as young as Agnes, ‘ mother ! ’ Mother, indeed ! I detest such childishness ! ’

‘ If I had a mother like Heather, I should call her mother, and nothing else,’ interposed Bessie, from her lowly position on the grass. ‘ Don’t be silly, Arthur ; let your brothers and sisters speak of your wife as they have found her.’

‘ But it irritates me,’ persisted the Squire ; ‘ while they were young it did not so much matter ; now, however, when they are all growing up into men and women, the name sounds absurd. Heather does not look a day older than Agnes.’

‘ That is the beauty of the thing,’ returned his opponent. ‘ If Heather looked fifty, or even as old as you do, the charm would be dispelled.’

‘Thank you for the implied compliment,’ he returned, reddening. It was a sore point with him that his youth was gone, that his life had borne no fruit; and, even had the world prospered with him, it is not a pleasant thing for a man to be told he looks old by a pretty girl!

‘Well, you know, Arthur,’ said the same girl, frank as she was pretty, ‘you never will look so young as your wife. In the first place, she is ten years younger than you; and in the second, you ought to take a leaf out of her book, and learn contentment. You ought to cease grumbling and making yourself and other people wretched. You ought to think yourself lucky you have got Berrie Down Hollow, instead of always wishing you were Lord Chancellor, or Archbishop of Canterbury, or King of England, or something of that kind.’

‘What has all this got to do with my brothers and sisters calling my wife their mother?’ he asked. ‘They have got a mother of their own, and one mother ought to be quite enough for any person.’

‘Mine is one too many for me,’ remarked Bessie, with a shrug and a pout; evading at the same time the newspaper wherewith Arthur made believe to deal her a rebuking blow. ‘It is the truth, and I tell her so a dozen times a week. As for Mrs Marsden, if you wanted Alick and the rest of them to feel that devotion towards her which you seem to think I ought to feel for my respected mother, why did you not let them go with her when she left Berrie Down? That was your grand mistake, Arthur; if you had given them so much a year and your blessing—’

‘Bessie, I allow no one to interfere in my family concerns,’ interrupted Arthur with dignity.

‘Yes, you do,’ persisted the young lady, ‘you allow mamma to do so; and as I know I shall not have a chance of speaking out my mind when once she comes, I have been trying latterly to make the best of my opportunities. Let me tell you all the benefits you would have derived from such an arrangement.’

‘I wish to goodness, Bessie, you would keep your opinions to yourself; you are enough to drive a man mad.’

‘And you are enough to drive a woman mad,’ she returned, still

looking up at him with a provoking smile on her face. 'Ah, well, you have got your troubles, and I suppose I shall have mine, if I live long enough. Now, Alick, what are you waiting to say?'

'That if Arthur wants me to give up calling Heather mother, I will do so,' spoke the lad. 'I know he has fed and clothed us, and—'

'Hang the boy,' interrupted Squire Dudley, pettishly, 'call her what you like, only let me hear no more about it ;' and Arthur and his companion resumed their study of the *Times*, while Alick, with his head bent a little, walked slowly down the lawn in the direction of the Hollow.

Suddenly there rang a glad cry after him of, 'Alick, Alick, she's come,' in answer to which the lad only waved his hand and ran on to the tangle of broom and bramble bushes, from out of which he brought a little girl, whom he bore in triumph on his shoulder up the hill.

It was a pretty scene, looking at it from the Hollow, on which the evening sunbeams fell.

The house formed the background of the picture, and for foreground there was the grassy slope, where were gathered around Mrs Dudley and Mrs Ormson all those who had been awaiting their coming.

A bustle and stir succeeded the previous stillness ; there was a rustle of women's dresses, a hum of women's voices. There was much kissing and rejoicing, much fondling over and welcoming of Heather, who, at length, disengaging herself from the detaining group of loving hands, went towards her husband, standing a little outside the circle, and said—

'They won't let me speak a word to you, Arthur. How have you been all this time? Have you missed me very much?' And as the others had greeted her, so she now addressed him with a little tremour in her voice, with tears of gladness at being home again standing in her eyes.

From a short distance, Bessie Ormson, who had duly presented her cheek to Heather's travelling companion, and received in return a maternal kiss, contemplated this performance, and as she did so, stamped her foot impatiently on the ground.

‘Have you forgotten me, Heather?’ she asked, coming forward and putting her hand almost shyly in Mrs Dudley’s. ‘There comes Lally,’ she added, pointing down the hill towards Alick, who advanced at a run, while the child from her triumphant position clapped her little palms exultingly, calling out—

‘Faster ! faster ! mamma, mamma !’

Panting for breath, Alick Dudley put Lally into her mother’s arms. ‘Me first, me first,’ she cried, clinging to Heather, and debarring with true feminine ingratitude the gallant knight, who had brought her safely up the hill, from all benefits derivable from the meeting.

‘You dreadful child—you bold, exacting little child,’ exclaimed Bessie, taking her away by force. ‘Do you think no one has any right to your mamma but yourself? don’t you see I leave my mamma; why can’t you be as good as I am? Oh! you naughty little puss. I would not have red hair, Lally; I would not have shilling curls all over my head. I would sell them if I had them, and wear a wig.’

Whereupon Lally in great glee declared her hair was not red, but ‘golden;’ and that Bessie had ugly hair.

‘I have what, chatterbox?’ demanded Bessie. ‘Say that again—only say it, and I will carry you down the hill and bury you among the blackberries. I will shake you to pieces; I will kill you with kisses. Now, is not my hair beautiful?’

‘No, it is ugly,’ persisted Lally; and then there ensued a fierce contradiction between the two, which ended in Bessie first making believe to smother the child, and then kissing her, as it may be questioned whether Bessie Ormson had ever kissed any other creature in her life.

‘I love ’oo,’ said Miss Lally, as a sequence to this performance, putting two of her fingers in her mouth, and surveying society generally with the profoundest composure.

‘And don’t you love me, pet?’ inquired Mrs Ormson, venturing upon the hazardous experiment of testing the strength of a child’s affections in the presence of strangers,—‘don’t you love me?’

‘No, Lally don’t,’ was the reply.

‘Not if I have brought you something very nice from London?’ persisted Mrs Ormson.

Lally stretched out her little hand for the bonbons, but declined to compromise herself by expressing any attachment for the donor.

‘Now, do you not love me?’ asked Mrs Ormson, persuasively.

Lally thought the matter over, and decided in the negative.

‘If you do not love my mamma, you must give her the bonbons back, Lally,’ suggested Bessie; and she made a feint of taking the sweets away, which drew forth such a wail from the child as attracted public attention to the trio.

‘Hush, hush, hush!’ exclaimed Bessie. ‘I would not have believed you could have been so naughty. There, kiss mamma, and make friends with her. You are to give me half those bonbons, you know!’

To which arrangement Lally demurred; but, eventually, being greatly under the dominion of Miss Ormson’s superior will, with much trouble of mind she consented to this division; and under the cedar-tree she and Bessie parted the spoil.

Such high matters are not, however, to be lightly settled; and they were still engaged in deciding who was to have the odd sweetmeat, when, looking up from her lap where the treasures were laid in two heaps, Bessie saw Mrs Dudley standing beside her.

‘Come in, dear,’ said Heather, ‘the dew is beginning to fall, you will catch cold;’ and as she spoke she laid her hand gently on Bessie’s shoulder.

Bessie turned and pressed her lips to the white soft fingers; then she tossed the two heaps into one, and saying to Lally, ‘You shall have them all,’ rose and faced Mrs Dudley.

‘I saw Gilbert yesterday,’ observed the latter.

‘Yes?’

The monosyllable Mrs Dudley understood to be interrogative.

‘And I asked him to come down here.’

‘Thank you very much; he will be glad to do so.’

‘I like him greatly.’

‘He is greatly to be liked?’ and Bessie, as she said this, slipped her hand, which was as cold as ice, into Mrs Dudley’s.

‘And devoted to you,’ went on Heather.

‘I wish I were more worthy his devotion,’ answered Bessie.

‘I wish I could understand you,’ was Mrs Dudley’s answer, after a pause.

‘I do not think there is much to understand,’ said Bessie ; but her heart gave a great leap as she spoke, for she knew she was telling a truthful woman a falsehood.

‘I only meant that you strike me as being a little odd at times,’ remarked Heather gently.

‘Not more odd than you strike me as being,’ was the reply. Then, noticing that her companion seemed surprised, she went on, ‘Cannot you comprehend ? won’t you comprehend that to a girl brought up as I have been, a woman such as you are is an enigma, a wonder, a never-ending, always-beginning puzzle ?’

‘What do you mean ?’ Heather paused in their walk back towards the house as she asked this question ; and I should like you to take your first look at her as she stands thus intent and unconscious.

Hair of the mellowest, darkest auburn, out of which the original red still gleamed in the sunlight ; eyes brown, and deep and tender ; the fairest, softest, womanliest complexion ; teeth white and regular ; a full and somewhat large mouth, parted as she waited for Bessie’s reply.

Altogether a firm face, and yet gentle—the face of a woman who had not known much sorrow, and yet whom you instinctively felt could endure patiently almost any amount of trouble which she might be called upon to bear ; the face of a woman who had from her earliest years thought of others first, of herself last ; the face of a woman whom, once married, a man would know it was hopeless for him to love with a sinful passion, but who would be a man’s good friend, his very right hand, in time of need ; a face in which there was ‘help ;’ a face, which no person who had once seen it, ever quite forgot, which you could not fancy changing and altering like the countenances of much more beautiful women.

It was the inner loveliness of her nature, its purity, its steadfastness, its pitiful tenderness, which made her seem so exceeding fair. It was the gentleness and the charity, the patience and the unself-

ishness abiding in her, which shone in her eyes and drew people towards her.

It was a calm, good, happy face at the first glance, and yet, when any one with a right understanding of human faces came to look into it closely, there was a sadness underlying the happiness—an expression of which I should find it difficult to convey an idea, were it not that the same half-sad, half-worn look is to be observed on the countenances of those whose constitutions are being undermined by undeveloped disease, i.e. by disease which unconsciously to themselves exists in their bodies, and is insidiously sapping their health.

A man says he is well, and he feels well ; and yet a doctor, looking in his face, can tell that some part of the mortal machinery is out of gear, and that ere long there will come a crash which shall reveal the secret of where the mischief has been brewing ; and in like manner, if anything be wrong about a human being's life, if utterly unknown to him or herself, there is a want in it—a vacuum ; a stream of affection running to waste ; twining tendrils involuntarily searching about for something to cling to ; if there be a mental hunger, which has not even sufficient self-knowledge to cry aloud for food ; if there be a thirsting for love, which the poor draught presented fails to satisfy ; if there exist aspirations higher and holier, loftier and grander, than can be fulfilled by the 'daily round, the common task ;' if there be an undefined feeling that the best part of the nature, bestowed by the Almighty, has never been comprehended, never called out—then, when the face of that man or that woman is in repose, there will lie brooding upon it a look of sadness, which sets the mind of an observer at work, marvelling where the inner life is out of joint—what the mental disease may be—which, unsuspected even by the patient, is eating the heart out of the fruit, the wheat out of the ripe ear of grain.

And it was perhaps this second look in Heather Dudley's face—the unconscious pathos of her expression when her features were in repose, which rendered her countenance so interesting.

After all, it is not when the sunlight is streaming over the landscape that the scene appeals most to our hearts ; it is the shadow

lying across the hill-side, the cloud darkling on the water, the shades of evening creeping stealthily down upon the bay, which gives that mournful, melancholy, pathetic look to the face of Nature, that touches us like a minor chord in music, like the sound of a plaintive melody, and awakens in our souls a powerful though often almost unconscious response.

In the twilight, when all harsh outlines are smoothed down, our dreams and our realities can walk forth hand in hand together, and there is but small discrepancy to be observed between them ; and in like manner, when the shadow of sorrow rests upon the face of a friend, our hearts travel out to meet his. Before the wind comes and the rain descends, we can behold the approaching presence of the storm walking upon the waters, and involuntarily we stretch forth our hands towards the bark which is sailing on, dreaming of no peril, unthinking of danger.

The sunshine in Heather Dudley's face was always pleasant to look upon ; and yet Bessie felt it was the inevitable shadow which attracted her, which made her cherish a love for this woman she had never felt for any other woman on earth.

Well enough Miss Ormson knew Heather's life was, according to the teaching of this world's lore, a wasted one. Well enough ; for the girl, though young, had lived in society, and had seen sufficient to teach her that, in all respects—socially, domestically, conjugally, pecuniarily—Heather might have done better ; might have married a man who could have set her up as an idol in his heart, and thanked God for every misfortune, for every apparent mischance, which had led him, by strange and devious paths, to the point where he met, and wooed, and wed Heather Bell.

And Heather herself had never discovered this fact. Though there would come that terribly plaintive look over her sweet face, that anxious, sorrowful, forecasting expression into her eyes, still she was a happy woman.

All this swept vaguely through Bessie Ormson's mind, even while she replied, nervously—

‘I cannot answer your question if you stand looking at me. Let us walk on, and I will try to tell you. Between us there is a gulf placed, and I stretch out my hands vainly trying to cross

it. You are all candour and truth ; I am all reserve and deceit—'

'Do not say that,' interrupted Mrs Dudley.

'But I will say it,' she persisted, passionately. 'You shall not think better of me than I deserve. You shall not imagine I am a girl like your girls—that I am a woman such as you are. Sometimes, sitting on the grass quietly by myself, I think about myself. Of course it is folly ; but I do it, and wonder what I should have been like had my lot been cast at Berrie Down. I have seen nothing in my life but planning and scheming and shamming—nothing till I came here. Amongst you all, I dream of a different life to any I have ever known. I feel like a fallen angel on a short visit to Paradise. How you look at me ! How stupid it is to talk about oneself ! Shall we go in ?'

'One moment,' Heather said. She had a clear, sweet voice, in which there was a great virtue of leisure. It was the voice of a woman whose life had not been hurried by anxiety, by passion, by excitement, or by over-work. It was one the melody of which never seemed out of time, never taken too fast. 'One moment. Are you really unhappy, Bessie ? Is there anything I could do, to—'

'To help me, you mean,' broke in the other, rapidly. 'No one can do that. Am I unhappy ? What cause have I for unhappiness ? Am I not engaged—almost settled ?'

'But do you love Gilbert ?' asked Mrs Dudley.

'Love him ! Yes, I do, as well as married people usually love—perhaps better,' answered Bessie, and she laughed and dropped the bonbons ; and then Lally and she picked them up out of the grass, and while she kept her face bent down, Bessie was thinking she could tell Mrs Dudley one or two things which it might not have been pleasant for that lady to hear.

'Lally and I are great friends,' she said, irrelevantly. 'I have put her to bed every night since you went away, and sang her to sleep afterwards. She is the only person who ever encored my music. Don't you love my "Ritornella," Lally ? Don't you delight in "Her dark hair hung loothe ?"'

'Iss,' said Lally, readily.

‘Agnes adopted Leonard in your absence, and has been really quite affecting in her maternal solicitude about that young gentleman ; but Lally and I agreed nobody could comb out her hair so well as I—nobody tell her one-half so many fairy tales. I fear we have not kept such good hours as we ought ; but she looks none the worse for it, does she ?’

And Bessie, taking up the child, turned the little freckled face towards the light, and putting her hand under Lally’s chin, waited for the mother’s opinion on the appearance of her first-born.

Heather, however, never spoke ; there was something the matter with her she could not have put into words ; there shot a pang through her heart such as had never disturbed it before, and involuntarily almost she stretched out her arms towards her little girl, who struggled into her mother’s embrace in spite of Bessie’s teasing efforts to detain her.

‘Well, Miss Lally, you’ll see whether I will shake down cherries for you to-morrow ! If any one had told me, I would not have believed you could have deserted poor Bessie. You promised to be true to me for life. You are a deceitful little monkey, and I won’t love you a bit.’

In answer to which Lally rejoicingly first slapped Bessie’s cheeks, and then pulled her hair, and finally offered her mouth, so full of sweetmeats that she experienced a difficulty in closing it, to the end that they might kiss and be friends.

‘No, I won’t kiss you, indeed,’ said Bessie. ‘I won’t kiss an uncertain little puss who is everybody’s Joe.’ Whereupon Lally declared in a voice choked with sentiment and sugar-plums, ‘Se isn’t bodies Joes.’

All this time Heather kept silence, holding the child tight as she could to her heart.

The sun had set, and as their faces were turned from the west, it seemed to her that they were walking out of the light into darkness.

She never said to the child, ‘Don’t you love me, are you not mamma’s pet ?’ for she could not, at that moment, have borne to draw a comparison between Lally’s attachment for Bessie and Lally’s attachment for herself.

If Heather had a sin, it was inordinate affection for that child ; if it can ever be criminal for a mother to love her first-born too much, then Heather was a grievous wrong-doer. She loved her son, but she loved Lally more ; loved the absurd little girl who, though christened Lily, had grown up as unlike one as can possibly be imagined ; so unlike that, not to offend the unities, it had been unanimously decided, in family conclave, that Lily should be changed to Lally.

‘Lily, indeed !’ sneered Mrs Ormson ; ‘an orange lily, perhaps. But the red hair, that would curl in ‘shilling curls,’ as Bessie said, was dearer to Heather than her boy’s darker locks, and she loved every inch of the child’s body—the fair freckled face, the sun-burnt arms, the plump little neck, the restless feet—with a love which was terrible, as all great affection is, in its intensity.

‘It was sinful,’ Mrs Ormson declared, ‘the way in which Heather spoiled that child !’ But if this were so, there were other sinners in the house besides Mrs Dudley, for Lally was the pet and plaything of every man, woman, and child about the place ; unless, indeed, it might be her father, who, reversing all ordinary rules, concentrated what affection he had to spare for any one on his son, whom he made, as Bessie unhesitatingly informed him, ‘a disagreeable little pest.’

Perhaps, however, it was not the father who made the child disagreeable so much as nature. Very little of Heather’s generous unselfishness seemed to have descended to her second-born. It appeared as though to Lally had fallen most of her mother’s good qualities, while Leonard inherited Mr Dudley’s good looks ; for Leonard was what is called a ‘beautiful boy,’ and all her best friends could say in favour of Lally was that, very probably, she would grow up into a handsome woman yet.

There was no pride about Miss Lally ; she was as ready to accept affection from the odd man that cleaned the knives and boots, as from stately Mrs Piggott, who having made overtures to Heather, soon after that young lady’s marriage, had returned to her old dominions and reigned supreme at Berrie Down, over kitchen, and dairy, and larder. To Lally, nothing in the way of attention or amusement came amiss ; from the feeding of the chickens to the

milking of the cows, from bull's-eyes to bonbons, from a tour round the premises, seated in a barrow wheeled by Ned, the odd man previously mentioned, to a gallop undertaken on the shoulders of that willing steed Alick, Lally was equally agreeable to, and gratified with all. She was so utterly cosmopolitan in her ideas, that Squire Dudley's pride was daily offended by her utter want of conservatism. She was so easily pleased, and she found so many people willing to please her, that he came seriously to the conclusion there must be something wrong in the child's mental constitution—some want in her brains, as he expressed it. 'I saw her absolutely one day last winter,' he told Mrs Ormson, 'with about two pounds of salt in her lap, being wheeled round the walks by Ned, in search of birds; "because you know, papa," she said, "if I can once put salt on their tails, we shall be able to catch them."'

Whereupon Mrs Ormson lifted her hands and eyes to heaven, and declared, 'Heather will never stop till she has made that child a perfect idiot.'

'I sent Ned to his work and Lally into the house,' proceeded Arthur, 'but it is of no use *my* speaking. Five minutes afterwards she was on Alick's shoulder, and he was carrying the salt for her in a bag tied round his neck.'

'Poor Heather, she will find out her mistake some day,' sighed Mrs Ormson.

'But it is not Heather alone,' went on Mr Dudley. 'Everybody is the same; everybody makes a perfect idol of Lally, while Leonard mopes about alone. Where could you find a better child than he is? He will walk with me from here to the mill and never say a word, while Lally's tongue never ceases from morning till night. Sometimes I think she is in fifty places at once, for wherever I go I hear her.'

'It is very sad,' observed Mrs Ormson, 'the child will be perfectly ruined.'

And there can be no doubt but that the lady believed she was speaking the literal truth. She did, indeed, consider Lally an utter mistake—her very existence an oversight on the part of Providence.

'A nice, quiet, pretty little girl, who would sit still in the nursery, with her doll and her picture-book,' was Mrs Ormson's idea of the correct style of thing in the scheme of creation ; but a child with red hair, with a face covered with freckles, exactly like a turkey's egg, with reddish-brown eyes, with legs that, in the course of the longest summer-day, never grew weary of carrying her from parlour to kitchen, from garden to Hollow, from Hollow to meadow ; a child who had no 'pretty ways,' according to Mrs Ormson's reading of juvenile attractiveness ; who would not learn anything, nor keep her frocks clean ; clearly the Almighty had not consulted Mrs Ormson before He sent Lally Dudley into the world, or such a mistake never would have been committed, not even to please Heather, to whom the little girl was sun, moon, stars, and planets.

And because her heart was bound up in the child, Heather could not bear that another should come in her place, and attract Lally towards her as Bessie had done. With the 'other children,' as Mrs Dudley still continued to call her husband's brothers and sisters, it did not matter ; with the servants also it was of no consequence, for they were all of the one household, all after a fashion members of one family ; but here was a stranger—daughter to a woman whom Heather did not much like—a girl whom in her inmost heart Heather distrusted—making friendly overtures to Lally, which Lally accepted with even more than her ordinary readiness, with an increase of her wonted gracious affability.

Was what Bessie said true—was Lally everybody's Joe? Did she not care for her mother so very, very much, after all? For the first time in her married life there came swelling up in Heather's heart a spirit of antagonism—a desire to quarrel ; but, before she reached the house, she conquered herself and said—

'Your mamma declares I spoil Lally. I wonder what she will think about you.'

'She can think what she likes, as she usually does,' answered Bessie, making a movement as if to take Lally from her mother. She had been in the habit of carrying the child off to bed every night, and it came natural to her now to do so, though Heather was at home once more.

She forgot she had been but at best a self-constituted viceroy, and that the rightful queen had returned to take possession of her own again ; but the involuntary backward step with which Heather repulsed her intention was like a revelation to Bessie. The woman she had regarded as perfect, was but flesh and blood, after all. She could feel jealous, and she did, and she meant to keep Lally all to herself for the future, and never to permit a stranger's hand to be laid, if she could help it, on the child.

But Bessie was not one to bear such a proceeding patiently. 'Don't depose me,' she said, in a tone which was one half of entreaty, half of banter. 'It won't be for long. Am not I going to a home of my own, where I shall have something else to do than sing lullabies to other people's children ? Besides, it will do you good ; you are a little inclined to be jealous. Never fear, I won't take Lally's love from you ; I could not do it if I would, and I would not if I could. Let me sing her to sleep still, please do. She won't need much rocking to-night ;' and she held out her arms to Lally, who tumbled headlong into them, only sufficiently awake to clutch at her mother's sleeve and entreat her to 'come too.'

'I will come up when you are in bed, pet,' said Mrs Dudley, turning aside into the dining-room, while the girl slowly ascended the broad staircase, humming 'Isabelle' while she carried her light burden step by step up to that pleasant chamber with the snowy draperies, with the wide prospect, with its windows half-covered with roses and greenery, which came back to Bessie Ormson's memory in dreams when she was far away both from Hertfordshire and Heather.

After a little time Mrs Dudley followed her, and kissed the children, and then stood looking at them lingeringly till she said she must go down to supper.

'Lally will be fast asleep in two minutes,' remarked Bessie, 'then I will follow you.' But the minutes passed, and still no Bessie put in her appearance at the 'old-fashioned meal,' as Mrs Ormson styled supper.

'Shall I tell Bessie ?' asked Agnes Dudley ; and she was about leaving the room when Heather stopped her.

‘I will go, love,’ she said, just touching the girl’s cheek with her hand in passing.

She had tender, caressing ways, this woman, whose life was still all before her. No one felt neglected when she entered. Her nature was to consider the very dumb animals,—to leave nothing outside the circle within which she stood ; and feeling that she might have been a little inconsiderate towards Bessie, she went to seek her, meaning to make amends, to thank her for all her kindness to Lally.

Very softly she opened the door—softly as a mother does who fears to wake her children ; for a moment she looked in and hesitated ; then, even more softly than she had come, she closed the door and stole along the corridor perplexed and sorrowful.

In the twilight she had seen Bessie kneeling on the floor beside Lally’s bed. She held one of the little girl’s hands tight in hers, and her face was buried in the counterpane. There was no need for singing then. Lally was fast asleep : the busy feet were still, the tireless tongue silent, the curly head quiet enough on the pillow, and Bessie, whom nobody ever beheld depressed in spirits, who was always either laughing or jesting, scolding or teasing, talking or devising some mischief, was sobbing in the gathering darkness as though her very heart were breaking.

If Heather had ever thought any hard thoughts about her visitor, they were swept out of her mind then ; if she had ever felt doubts of the girl, those doubts gave place to sympathy and pity ; if she had ever felt there was something in Bessie Ormson which she did not comprehend, which she would rather not comprehend, that sensation of repulsion was changed into an earnest desire to understand her thoroughly, into a conviction that in places the stream was dark only because it ran deep.

Vaguely and instinctively all this came into Heather Dudley’s heart. As she retraced her steps along the corridor, she could not have told any one the reason of the great change which had come over her ; but a great change, nevertheless, had been effected during the moment she stood looking at the kneeling figure, prostrated in a very abandonment of grief.

From that hour, through good report and through evil, when

appearances were in her favour and when appearances were all against her, unconsciously almost to herself, Heather Dudley loved Bessie Ormson.

In her grief, in her agony of sorrow, in her clinging attachment to Lally, in her passion of despair, of hopelessness, of loneliness, of regret, of indecision, Heather's heart clave to that of her guest, and her soul was from thenceforth knit to Bessie, as was the soul of Jonathan with the soul of David.

CHAPTER V.

AT SUPPER.

ALTHOUGH Mrs Ormson, being in her own estimation a great lady, followed the fashions and affected London hours, still, to do her justice, supper was one of those ancient customs it delighted her to see kept up in her nephew's house.

'I only wish, my dear,' she said to Heather, 'we could do as we liked in town, and I would have supper every night of my life instead of that late dinner, which is neither, as Mr Ormson says, fish, flesh, nor fowl. Now, what can be more cosy and comfortable than this?' and the lady complacently surveyed the supper-table, whereon was spread a meal that might indeed have caused one of Mr Ormson's late dinners to hide its diminished head with a sense of grievous humiliation.

Thanks to the girls, the arrangement of the table was tasteful also; there were freshly-gathered flowers peeping out from baskets filled with moss; there were cool lettuces and crisp radishes, and little banks of mustard and cress, all placed and grouped with a certain artistic effect; there was home-made bread, not brown and sodden as home-made bread usually is, but white and light as Mrs Piggott's hands could make it; there were delicious pats of yellow butter, brought straight from the dairy; there were late cherries and strawberries, and early raspberries, gooseberries, and currants

on the table ; all daintily set out with green leaves ; all looking, to quote Bessie, 'as though somebody cared for them.' There was cream so rich that Mrs Ormson declared it made her feel inclined to forswear London for ever ; while, for those who desired substantial refreshment, Mrs Piggott had sent up her usual *pièce de resistance*—a round of spiced beef, together with fowls, a ham, and a couple of veal pies, which latter were, she knew, considered her specialty. Tarts also were there, and various 'shapes ;' for the good lady declared Mrs Ormson should not go back to town and say 'she never saw a meal fit for a Christian to sit down to in the house, leastways she sha'n't say it with truth,' finished Mrs Piggott, as she arranged a paper frill like a shroud round the knuckle end of the ham, and garnished her beef with parsley.

Through the open windows the scent of many flowers came floating on the night air into the room, and the light of the lamp fell on the quiet faces of the young people gathered round the table.

'Where is Bessie ?' inquired Mrs Ormson, as Mrs Dudley re-entered the apartment.

'She will be here presently,' Heather answered, taking her seat ; but many minutes passed before Bessie made her appearance, and, shrinking away from the light, drew a chair towards one of the windows, declaring she did not want any supper, that she was tired and lazy, and thought eating destructive to the romance of life.

'Don't be absurd, Bessie,' said Mrs Ormson.

'Nothing can be further from my intention,' was the reply.

'How did you come from the station, Heather ?' asked Laura, the youngest of the second generation of Dudleys. 'I never heard the fly drive up to the door.'

'We came back with Mr Raidsford,' said Heather.

'You came with whom ?' demanded Arthur Dudley ; from the other end of the table.

'With Mr Raidsford. He travelled down in the same compartment, and kindly offered to drive us home ; but our luggage, at least a box of Mrs Ormson's, we left at Palinsbridge. I suppose the pony-cart can go over for it to-morrow ?'

'Good heavens! mamma is going to take up her residence here,' whispered Bessie to Alick, who was seated within ear-shot.

'Well, Heather, I really wonder at you,' said Squire Dudley, laying down his knife and fork; 'I did think you had more sense of what was due to yourself and to me than to accept a favour at the hands of such an arrant snob as Compton Raidsford, a man who looks down upon us all, who thinks more of his hundreds of thousands than of having come of an ancient family, of having good blood in one's veins.'

'That's right, Arthur; that's what brings down the galleries,' remarked Bessie. 'Go on. In this money-loving age—'

'Oh! of course you stand up for trade,' retorted Arthur.

'Of course, I think so I ought, when every morsel I put in my lips, every article of clothing I put on my back, is paid for by trade.'

'Bessie,' interposed Mrs Ormson, 'how often am I to tell you it is not polite to speak of personal matters in general society?'

'If this be general society, I sit rebuked,' said Bessie, while Heather pleaded—

'Without downright rudeness I could not have refused Mr Raidsford's offer, Arthur. I could not, indeed. He was so very kind and pressing, so cordial, in fact, that I felt it would be ungracious to decline. Would it have been possible to refuse? Mrs Ormson, do you think it would?'

'On the contrary, I consider it would have been the height, as you say, of rudeness,' replied that lady, for once deciding against the Squire. 'And, for my part, I think Mr Raidsford a most gentlemanly person, quite above his origin. I can assure you, I never enjoyed a journey more in my life, and the drive from Palinsbridge was delightful. And to see how every one touched their hats to him,' finished Mrs Ormson, forgetting in her enthusiasm that such a person as Lindley Murray had ever existed.

'Touch their hats, indeed!' repeated Arthur, with a muttered oath.

'Don't be profane, sir,' said Bessie, tapping him on the arm. 'A Conservative ought never to object to see a great man respected

by the masses. When all is said and done, it is riches make the man, you know. It is not birth, or virtue, or learning, but money, for money is power; and what is the meaning of the word aristocracy, but the powerful classes, I should like to know? Consider how many blankets, how many soup tickets, how many donations to hospitals, how much employment Mr Compton Raidsford's income represents, and be dumb. We are all worshippers of some golden calf, so let his worshippers kneel down before him, and rest content.'

'I wish to Heaven, Bessie, you were not so infernally clever,' remarked the Squire.

'And I wish to gracious, Arthur, that in some respects you were not so intolerably stupid,' returned the young lady, which observation elicited a statement from Mrs Ormson, that 'she should be glad indeed when Bessie was married, and had a husband to take care of her.'

'Ah! mamma, it is very well for you to talk,' replied Bessie; 'but you will be sorry when I am married.'

'I only wish you would give me the chance of being sorry,' observed Mrs Ormson, pretending not to notice that Arthur was helping her to a second supply of spiced beef. Suddenly, however, becoming aware of the fact, she exclaimed, 'My dear boy, when *do* you think I ate last? You have given me enough to dine a whole family.'

'Never mind, mamma, eat it for me,' said Bessie, from the open window; whereupon Mrs Ormson bridled, and wondered 'what had come to Bessie,' thought 'she had been made too much of,' and remarked 'she did not envy Gilbert Harcourt.'

'Neither do I, mamma, so for once we are of the same opinion,' said Bessie shortly, at which point Heather deemed it wise to turn the conversation, not sorry on the whole, perhaps, that it had glided off Mr Raidsford, and Mr Raidsford's carriage, and Mr Raidsford's considerate attentions to herself.

After a time, also, other tongues began to be heard: Alick had to tell of the offer Lord Kemms had made for 'Nellie,' their two-year-old colt.

'I was breaking her yesterday,' he said, 'on that piece of ground

beyond the Hollow, when his Lordship, riding past, pulled up his horse, and asked me if she was for sale. I told him I did not know, but could ask my brother ; and seeing he had taken a fancy to her, I added I did not think he would part with her excepting for a long price.'

'And what do you call a long price, young gentleman?' he inquired, laughing ; 'so I thought I might as well value her high enough. A hundred guineas, my lord,' I answered.

'Make it pounds, and you shall have a cheque whenever you like to send her over,' he said.

'Oh! what good fortune,' exclaimed Heather, 'of course you sent her, Alick ;' but the lad's countenance fell. 'Arthur—' he began, at which point Arthur took up his parable for himself.

'The filly will be worth three hundred next year,' he said ; 'Lord Kemms shall not coin money out of me.'

For a minute there ensued a dead silence, then Heather, turning to Agnes, said, 'And how are the chickens going on, dear?'

'Oh! we have got five sets more out since you left,' was the reply ; 'there are fifty of the sweetest little chucks you ever saw, just pecking—'

'And two fresh calves, mother,' broke in Lucy Dudley.

'And pigeons without end,' added Cuthbert ; 'and I found in the pea-hen's nest four young ones : and, mother, the long meadow is all mowed, and we shall have the grandest crop, Ridley says, ever came off it ; and we have painted the gates in honour of your coming back, and the garden is as neat as neat, not a weed ; and Alick and I rolled the grass and the drive this morning, and nailed up the clematis that the wind tore down the other night, and Aggy and Alick have covered your sofa, and Lucy has—'

'Hush, Cuthbert, don't tell tales,' interposed Lucy, laughing ; whereupon Heather, with a smile to both, stretched her hand over towards the boy, who took it in both of his.

'May I add my mite to the family news?' interposed Bessie at this juncture. 'I have trained Beauty to beg, and taught Muff to stand in a corner ; I have nearly broken my neck trying to learn to ride ; I was tumbled completely over attempting to milk Cow-

slip, an ill-conditioned beast, who did not in the least appreciate my delicate attentions.'

'Oh, mother! it was such fun,' said Laura; 'you should have seen Bessie sprawling on the grass, and Cowslip looking at her; Alick held her horns, and Cuthbert her tail, and Agnes showed Bessie how to milk, but it was all of no use.'

'The quadruped was wiser than the biped,' remarked Bessie, 'and declined experiments. For the future, I intend to learn wisdom from a cow.'

'I wish you could learn wisdom from anything,' observed Mrs Ormson.

'My beloved mother, that, I fear, is impossible, since I have failed to acquire it from you,' said Bessie.

'You remember those letters you forwarded to me, Arthur,' broke in Heather at this point; 'one was from Miss Hope, to say she had returned from Munich, and would like to come to us; and the other from Mrs Black, who had not heard I was in London, and wanted to know whether it would be convenient for her and Mr Black to pay us a visit now, instead of later on in the year. Mr Black has been ill, and it is his most leisure time at present; so I called in Stanley Crescent and arranged that they should bring Harry Marsden down with them next week. It really is pitiable to see poor Mrs Marsden with all those young children about her, ill as she is.'

'Was there no one else, Heather, you could have asked while you were about it?' he inquired. 'We have a tolerably large barn, and plenty of hay and straw, so that a score or two more would make little difference.'

Heather bit her lip, but otherwise took no notice of her husband's remark. Heaven knew she had not gone out of her way to ask any of these people, who were neither kith nor kin of hers, and whom, truth to say, it would scarcely have grieved her had she never beheld in the flesh again.

If the house were full of visitors during the summer season, as it usually was, those visitors were none of her seeking, although on her fell the burden of amusing and catering for them.

With one and another Arthur walked through the fields, or down the lane, or across the meadows towards the Hollow. To Mrs Ormson he would discourse concerning his grievances; he would quarrel with Mrs Black about the relative merits of town and country; while from Mr Black he culled such information anent the 'way in which a man with push and a few hundreds might get on in London,' that for months subsequently Squire Dudley thought of nothing excepting how he might best contrive to emigrate to this wonderful El Dorado, to those metropolitan gold-fields, where nuggets were discovered, not in pits and creeks, but in dingy city offices, or in great board-rooms, all shining with polished mahogany and bright morocco leather.

As for Miss Hope, she was to Heather, saving by correspondence, an utter stranger. Never in her life had the present mistress of Berrie Down Hollow set eyes on the sister of the lady who had once reigned there supreme. For more than seven years Miss Hope had wandered to and fro on the earth. She had wintered here; she had summered there. She had been returning every season to London; and every season she heard of some fresh plan, or met with some fresh person, that induced her to defer her intention of coming back to England.

Bohemianism is not confined to one sex or class in the community, and there are numbers of forlorn spinsters and lonely widows, running loose about the Continent, frequenting British watering-places and foreign spas, picking up acquaintances in railway carriages and at table d'hôtes, who would be greatly disgusted if they were assured that the lives of the men they call Bohemians in London are infinitely more useful, and quite as respectable, as theirs;—wandering women, who have no care for the Lares and Penates of the ordinary English home, whose talk is of art and of far-away cathedrals, of foreign cookery and Rhine wines, who have got up to see the sun rise in every country except their own, who go in for passports instead of Sunday-schools, who sit next 'our own correspondent' at dinner-parties on their return to London, and converse with him concerning Rome and Vienna, when they mutually agree that the Continent is the place to live, that the

man, woman, or child, who is content to reside in England, should be sent to the Asylum for Idiots at once.

These are the people who ask young girls whether they have been abroad, and, on receiving an answer in the negative, remark that they envy them. If any one have the temerity to inquire why, they reply, 'Because she has never seen Paris, and the first sight of Paris is something worth living for.' Beyond climate and cheapness, and being able to do as one likes, these Bohemians never can give a reason for the faith that is in them; but that they hold such faith sincerely is certain.

'Everything is so different,' they declare, if pressed on the subject; 'the cooking, for instance.'

'It is, and I detest messes,' says some plain-spoken John Bull; whereupon the elderly Bohemian inquires, 'whether the speaker has ever dined at Zapolì's?' implying thereby that he is utterly ignorant of the subject about which he has been talking.

Such a woman was Miss Hope—a woman who went poking about foreign galleries, and visiting artists' studios; who had, if her own account were to be believed, seen every modern statue in process of chiselling, who had been to every opera which ever was performed, who conscientiously believed she had exhausted Europe, who wrote home reams of letters about the Carnival and the Pope, about festivals and bull-fights, about Mont Blanc and German gaming-tables, and who, in common with most English travellers, believing the Lord had made mountains and lakes, kings, queens, popes, cardinals, musicians, actors, actresses, and painters, on purpose to amuse and improve the people of Great Britain, considered it only an act of common courtesy towards the Almighty on the part of that nation to see as much of the great Continental entertainment He had provided for the pleasure and edification of his chosen race as possible.

All this and much more had Bessie Ormson heard concerning Miss Hope. Many and various were the comments that had fallen upon her ear concerning 'that funny old woman,' as she mentally called Arthur Dudley's respected aunt. From Mrs Piggott, who declared she hated Miss Hope as she hated 'pison,' to other per-

sons higher in the social scale—the name of one of whom, at all events, Bessie would not have cared to mention, even to herself, in her bed-chamber, lest a bird of the air might carry it away—from Mrs Piggott up, I repeat, the girl had heard stories of Miss Hope, and her heart burned within her at the sound of her name.

‘I do trust I shall be at Berrie Down when your aunt arrives, Arthur,’ she said; and the speech was an opportune diversion at the moment. ‘It has been a dream of my life to meet Miss Hope.’

‘I do not imagine you would agree particularly well, if you did meet,’ answered Arthur, sulkily.

‘We might for a little time,’ said Bessie, laughing. ‘Heather, do be polite, and ask me to remain until after Miss Hope’s arrival. I have heard so much of her, she seems quite like an old acquaintance.’

‘From whom have you heard much of her, Bessie?’ inquired Mrs Ormson; ‘not from me, I am confident.’

‘My dearest mamma, other human beings besides yourself have been endowed by Providence with the gift of speech,’ replied Bessie; but she bent as she spoke to stroke Muff—bent in order to conceal her face, though she was sitting in the shade with the cool night air blowing right in upon her.

‘Don’t be pert, miss,’ retorted Mrs Ormson; ‘from whom have you heard so much of Miss Hope?’

‘From one and another,’ answered Bessie, carelessly; ‘I am the rolling stone which gathers moss, contrary to the words of the proverb; and, wherever I go, I hear something to the advantage or disadvantage of somebody. Concerning Miss Hope, the moss I have gathered is to the effect that she dresses peculiarly badly abroad, and peculiarly well in England; that foreigners regard her with awe and wonder, as an average specimen of the British female; that she praises everything English in foreign countries, and everything English when abroad; that she is to be met with on the stairs leading to attic studios, and dines in the most wonderful manner for threepence per diem; that she is considered mad by the Parisians, and a great and good lady by the Germans; that she was requested to leave Vienna; and that at Rome she is regarded with distrust, because of the audible comments she is in

the habit of making during mass, concerning the mummary of the Catholic religion. For the rest, I am told that, since her nephew has come of age and married, she has vowed a vow never to set foot in Copt Hall, but will, when she returns to England, take up her abode in a London boarding-house, where she can discourse to her fellow-sufferers concerning French cookery and George Sand, the gondolas of Venice, and the terrible designs and wonderful genius of Napoleon the Third.'

'Who told you all this, Bessie?' demanded Squire Dudley, turning round in his chair as he asked the question.

'What can it matter who told me?' she replied. 'Is the record not true?'

'True or false, I should like to know the name of your informant,' he said; 'for I never knew but one person who talked in that way of my aunt. Was it a man or a woman?' he persisted.

'You might be more polite, Arthur,' she replied; 'a lady.'

'Was it Mrs Aymescourt?' he asked.

'I did not know there was such a person upon earth,' she replied.

'Don't tell stories, Bessie,' interposed Mrs Ormson; 'you must have heard of her over and over again.'

'If I ever did, I have forgotten all about her,' answered Bessie; 'at any rate, it was not from any one of the name of Aymescourt I ever heard a sentence concerning Miss Hope's peculiarities.'

'And who is Mrs Aymescourt?' inquired Heather.

'Oh! a friend of Miss Hope's; at least, she used to be,' answered Mrs Ormson, vaguely; and then she looked at Arthur, who, pulling cherries out of a basket lined with green leaves, refused either to meet her glance, or to vouchsafe any further information on the subject.

'Did you know Mrs Aymescourt, Arthur?' asked Heather, whose curiosity was a little piqued.

'I—yes, to be sure; she used to be staying with my aunt at Copt Hall, but I have not seen her these ten years.'

'Was not there something about Mr Aymescourt having come into another fine property?' inquired Mrs Ormson.

'Marsden said he had,' returned the Squire; 'likely enough,

for we know who takes care of his own ; and certainly Aymescourt had luck beyond what falls to the share of any honest man. He had a large income to begin with, or else madam never would have married him ; but I dare say they were quite able to spend it all, so probably this other property fell in none too soon.'

'Where do they live?' asked Heather.

'I have not the slightest idea,' Arthur answered ; 'my aunt keeps up some kind of acquaintanceship, I understand, with them, as she does with everybody, but I have seen nothing of them for years ;' and as he spoke Squire Dudley made another dive among the cherries, and pulled a fresh handful from amidst the green leaves.

'Give me some, Arthur, before you eat them all,' entreated Bessie ; 'or, stay, the moon must be up by this time ; I can go into the garden and gather some for myself. Will you come with me, Alick?'

And Bessie, who was not above flirting, even with a lad of eighteen, when it suited her purpose to do so, drew Alick from the dining-room across the hall, into the drawing-room, and so out on to the long terrace-like walk which overlooked the Hollow, and all the pleasant country stretching away towards the west.

'I did not want the cherries in the least,' she began, putting her hand within Alick's arm, and speaking in her usual don't-careish tone ; 'I did not want the cherries, but I wanted to get away from mamma—she does so worry me, that I say things to her I feel sorry for afterwards. What a pity it is we cannot choose our own mothers, or that we are not allowed to exchange them after we come to years of discretion ! Only to think, that out of three sisters my mamma should be my mamma. Even Mrs Black, or your own mother, I think I could have got on with ; but, as papa wisely observes, these things are arranged for us.'

'But don't you love your mother, Bessie?' asked the boy, with a vague sense on him that the girl's talk was wicked.

'Dont I what?' she demanded.

'Don't you love your mother?' he repeated, with the feeling growing stronger upon him that his view of the matter was correct, and Bessie's wrong ; 'of course, I know you disagree with her,

and quarrel, and contradict her, but still, for all that, don't you love her in the bottom of your heart?'

'Shall I tell you a secret?' she inquired, as they turned the end of the house—the garden end.

'If you will be so kind,' Alick replied, thinking at the same time how exceedingly beautiful Bessie looked in the moonlight. Perhaps she guessed at his thought, for she sighed, wishing that some person whom she liked much better than Alick Dudley were standing beside her at the moment, and then she forgot what she had been going to say, and went a long mental journey, while the youth waited patiently for her to speak.

'Will you be so kind?' he asked at last.

'So kind as what?' she repeated. 'Oh! to tell you a secret. From the bottom of my heart, Alick, I never loved but one woman on earth, and that woman is your brother's wife. If I had a mother like her now, or a sister, or anything—' she went on, hurriedly, only to stop short and leave her sentence unfinished.

'Heather would be a mother to you,' said the lad, softly.

'No, she wouldn't,' was the reply; 'she couldn't, and it is not fit she should. There is nobody like Heather could be mother, or sister, or friend, or anything to me now. Heather does not like me, I know she does not, and I cannot blame her for it, for I am cross and hateful.'

'Oh, Bessie! you are delightful, and so pretty!'

'I wish I were not pretty, flatterer,' she said. 'I should like to be as ugly as Joan Harcourt, and as good. It must be nice to honour one's parents, let them be as disagreeable as they will, and to love one's neighbour, even though she keep a parrot, and let her girls hammer at a piano placed against the party-wall, and is altogether as great a nuisance as Mrs Riccarde, who lives next door to us. Oh, Alick, how lovely and peaceful the country looks in the moonlight! Is not that the house at Kemms Park I see, shining white among the trees? What a delicious place! Do you know Lord Kemms' family name?'

'Baldwin,' he replied.

'Baldwin!' repeated Miss Bessie, and there was just a shade of disappointment in her voice. 'Is he a good-looking man, Alick?'

I wish I had been with you yesterday in the Croft when he passed. That is the only taste which I have inherited from my mother ; I do dearly love a lord.'

'Bessie !' exclaimed Alick.

'It is a fact,' she persisted ; 'I do not in the least believe they are made of the same flesh and blood as the commonalty. I delight in men who have had ancestors ; that is one reason why I like all of you, because on one side of the house, at least, you come of good people.'

'I am not ashamed of my mother's family,' answered the lad, a little hastily.

'No, but you are not proud of it ; Maddox Cuthbert, alderman, no doubt, was a most charming old institution, and highly respected in the city ; but still, that is not like being in the peerage, is it, Alick, or amongst the country gentry ?'

'I do not think it matters much what one is, if one have no money,' he replied. 'Did not you yourself say, at supper, riches make the man ?'

'If there is one thing I object to more than another,' interrupted Bessie, 'it is to have my own conversational sins brought up as witnesses against me. I was only jesting about lords, Alick. Don't I know the ancestors of Lord Kemms were something or other in the city, not nearly so respectable as our grandfather ? But, seriously, I should like to see his lordship. I have a curiosity about him ; was he alone, or had he a groom ?'

'He was quite alone,' said Alick Dudley, laughing, almost in spite of himself, at her persistency, 'and he spoke to me very much as anybody else might have done. Do you not think it would be a good thing if there were a kind of "Court Circular" published at Kemms Park, telling us all about the great folks there—what visitors they had, what time they ate and drank ?'

'Yes, and we might be the editors, and walk over every day to learn particulars of their doings. I wish Lord Kemms would ask me to go and stay there.'

'Perhaps he may, when Mr Harcourt has made his fortune, and is created an earl.'

'Then I shall be grey-haired,' she said, 'and have rheumatism

so bad, that even Kemms Park will seem disagreeable. How beautiful those trees do look, Alick ! Is there not a village somewhere near Mr Raidsford's place ?'

'North Kemms you mean, I suppose,' replied her companion ; 'it is two miles, I should say, beyond Mr Raidsford's, that is, two miles by the road, but there is a path across the fields, which cuts off a great corner. It is a pretty walk to North Kemms, and there is such an old, old church there.'

'Where ?' asked Heather, joining them at the moment.

'At North Kemms,' answered Bessie, promptly. 'Alick is going to take me to see it next Sunday afternoon, are you not, Alick ?'

'If you do not think the walk too much,' he said ; and then the rest of the party came out to 'see the moonlight,' and there was no more talk, either about Lord Kemms or Kemms Park.

That same night, Bessie having shaken down her hair, Heather came into her room, hoping Bessie would not be vexed if she asked her one little favour.

'A hundred if you like,' answered the girl.

'I should be glad if you would speak to your mamma with more, more—'

'Politeness,' suggested Bessie, finding Mrs Dudley pause for want of a suitable word.

'Not exactly politeness, but respect,' said Heather ; 'you know, dear, she *is* your mother, and you ought to—'

'Please, stop,' entreated Bessie. 'I will strive to do what you ask for *your* sake ; if I cannot be good for that, nothing can make me good. You were very fond of your mother, I suppose—very tender towards her—very dutiful, no doubt ?'

'I hope I was,' Heather answered, in that low tone in which women talk of the dead whom they have loved.

'And she was very fond of you ?'

'My dear child, what a question ! of course she was.'

'Well, supposing she had not been fond of you, nor you of her, perhaps even you might not have found it in the least degree easier to be dutiful and tender than I do ?'

'But you must be fond of her,' Heather asserted.

'I do not see any *must* in the matter ; I never asked her to

bring me into the world. If she had consulted me, I should decidedly have preferred being left out of it. Well, then, since to please herself she did bring me into the world, what has she done for me? My brothers have had all her care and attention; she married young, as you know, and to some women it does not seem a very agreeable thing to have a great girl treading on their heels, and calling them mother. She dressed me as a child long after I was a girl;—when she could not help herself, and had to acknowledge that I was growing up, she sent me from the nursery to the school, and kept me there till the state of the domestic finances compelled my return; since which time, the one object, aim, and end of her life has been to drive me to marry somebody—to get rid of a child she never liked.'

'Bessie!' remonstrated Heather.

'It is true,' the girl persisted, passionately; 'she never liked me—she never wanted to have a daughter—she has told me so over and over again. Suppose you acted towards Lally as she has acted towards me. Suppose you kept the child shut up in a London nursery, and never spoke to her, unless it was to find fault with or punish her. Suppose you were out from morning till night, following your own pleasure (my father was rich in those days, and she could visit, and dress, and spend as much as she chose), and left Lally to the mercy of strangers, to the kindness and attention of a cheap nurse. Suppose you grudged your child the money necessary to give her a good education, and sent her to a school where there was not enough to eat, nor sufficient clothing to keep her warm at night. Suppose Arthur gave you money to pay for an expensive school, and that you pocketed the difference—'

'Ah! stop—stop, Bessie! I won't believe it—I cannot believe any woman, any mother, capable of such wickedness!' entreated Heather; but Bessie relentlessly continued:

'Then when Lally grew to woman's estate, should you expect her to honour a mother who had acted such a part by her? and what I have told you is not the worst, Heather, is not the worst!'

'And what is worst—dear?'

'That I must keep to myself,' replied the girl, rising as she spoke, and flinging her hair back from her face. 'I have often

thought, since I came down here this time, that such people as we are have neither right nor title to mix among such as you; and yet I do not know—whatever of good I have learned, whatever faith in virtue and honesty I possess, I have learned and I have acquired from you. Oh, Heather!—oh, Heather!—’ and she clasped her hands high above her head. Then, in a moment, the fit was over, and the speaker fell into her usual tone. ‘I will try to do what you ask,’ she said, ‘and treat my respected parent with the deference you desire. Kiss me for that—kiss me once, kiss me twice—kiss me as though you meant it. If I had been a man, I should have married you, Heather; if I had been a duke, I should have laid my rank and wealth at your feet, and prayed you take them—take everything, if you would only take me as well. If you tell me to do it this minute, I will stay with you all my life, and never marry any one.

‘What a strange girl you are!’ said Heather, tossing over the soft hair, twining and curling it round her hand.

‘Ay! all puzzles seem strange till you hold the key,’ answered Bessie. ‘Let me light you along the passage, and do not lie awake thinking of me.’

CHAPTER VI.

BESSIE'S LETTER.

THE summer days ran on. They flowed by smooth and pleasant—so Bessie Ormson said in one of her sentimental moods—like a swift river among lovely green fields.

‘Look at that stream,’ she remarked to Alick, as they stood, on the Sunday following Heather’s return, side by side, leaning over the parapet of a little bridge which spanned the Kemm; ‘do you know what it puts me in mind of?’

‘No,’ answered the boy, to whom sometimes the talk of his

companion was as the talk of a creature from another world 'I cannot know what anything puts you in mind of, for you are like no other person I ever met in all my life before.'

'So much the better for you,' she replied. 'Do I not often inform you I am one of the daughters of Cain, come on a short visit to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden? and that brings me back to the river: it runs by—like existence at Berrie Down—with scarcely a ripple on its surface. I should like to be the Kemm,' she added in a lower tone, 'murmuring on over the pebbles, never singing a more passionate strain than that—never fretting or fuming—never forcing my way through rocks and stones—never brawling—never uncertain as to my future course—but stealing quietly and peacefully to the great sea;' and as she spoke, Bessie dropped her arms over the parapet of the little bridge, and looked into the stream sadly and dreamily.

Let me sketch her for you—Herbert Ormson's only daughter, Gilbert Harcourt's affianced wife—or rather let me make the attempt, for it is not easy to give in pen and ink an idea of the personal appearance of a girl like Bessie Ormson, whose mood was shifting as the sunbeams, whose beauty was changeful as the shadows flitting over the grass in the golden summer-time.

Scarcely of the middle height, figure slight and delicately rounded, she was not destitute of dignity, though lithe and lissom as a child: she had a small head, which she could rear, on occasions, almost defiantly; a mass of dark brown hair, smoothly braided on her cheeks, and then rolled up at the back of her neck in coil after coil; eyes of the darkest, deepest, divinest blue, shaded by long black lashes, that gave to her face, when in repose, an almost pathetic expression; a complexion which neither sun nor wind seemed able to spoil; she had lips like coral, and teeth like pearls; and a short, provoking, piquant, saucy upper lip. Was it any wonder, think you, that Alick Dudley should consider her the perfection of beauty?—that almost unconsciously the fancies and loves of his future life were shaped and moulded by this his earliest ideal of feminine loveliness?

And yet it was no mere beauty of feature that caused Bessie Ormson to seem so irresistibly charming: it was that ever-varying

expression of which I have spoken—that shifting look, now sad, now gay, now earnest, now provoking, now coquettish, now soft and womanly, and again almost sarcastic in its keen perception of human folly and human weakness—which gave variety to her face.

Always changing—never for two minutes the same—always filling the beholder with a vague wonder as to what strangely-varied mental book such a face could be the index.

It was wistful, it was saucy, it was sorrowful, it was joyous. There was a shadow lying across her eyes one moment ; they were sparkling with mirth the next. She would look at Heather as though she were gazing into the depths of a clear stream, with a strange dreamy glance, and before you could fix that expression on your mind it was gone.

See her with Lally, and her face was the face of a child ; leave her to herself for an instant, and there came an anxious, troubled look on her countenance. She was all things—mischievous, tender, high-spirited, quiet, loving, cross, full of bitter repartee, of premature worldly knowledge.

She had eaten of the tree too soon ; and, if that fruit set her mental teeth on edge, who may say the fault lay with Bessie ?

She was clever, as Arthur Dudley had truly observed ; that is, she was not clever in accomplishments, nor as regarded solid learning, but rather socially and conversationally.

She was no linguist, not much of a musician, nothing of an artist ; she had not read much, but she could guess what people were thinking of ; she could piece this and that together, and tell what motives influenced them, what were their purposes, by what considerations they were swayed. For this reason, many persons had an objection to very intimate association with the girl ; she never rested content with words—she went straight back to the thoughts words concealed.

The young folks at Berrie Down Hollow, however, who had no secrets and no plans, found her capital company. Even Lally was not more tireless than she. Ever ready to go out to walk, to inspect the poultry-yard, to try her hand at butter-making, to gather flowers and group them into bouquets, to shake the cherry-

trees, to carry Lally into the Hollow and hide her among the blackberry bushes, to smother the child in armfuls of freshly-mown grass, to lead the way, fleet of foot, to the meadows, where the haymakers were at work, to don with demurest air a snowy apron, and help Mrs Piggott whisk eggs, or prepare her fruit for preserving !

Even Mrs Piggott, who entertained a most cordial dislike for Bessie's maternal parent, brightened up when she saw that pretty roguish face peeping in at the door of kitchen, larder, and dairy.

Of severe, not to say despotic, principles, inclined to resent intrusions into her domains as acts of revolt against a legally-constituted authority, Mrs Piggott, nevertheless, not merely tolerated Bessie's visits, but rejoiced in them, and few things delighted the beauty more than a forenoon with 'that delightfully respectable old wonder,' as she called the housekeeper.

It was a sight to see Mrs Piggott and Bessie employed in making red-currant jelly—Mrs Piggott arrayed in a clean cotton gown, and a cap with many borders, looking sharply after her assistant to see that she religiously removed every stem, while Lally, perched on the table, superintended the work, and ate whole handfuls of the fruit, in gleeful defiance of Bessie's threats of executing condign punishment upon her.

'Dear, dear Miss,' observed Mrs Piggott on one occasion, surveying Bessie over her spectacles, 'who would ever think you were your mamma's daughter ?'

'No one, Mrs Piggott,' was the young lady's prompt reply. 'Don't you think it a pity mothers so seldom take after their children?' which inversion of the usual proposition so utterly astonished Mrs Piggott's understanding, that she was glad to direct Bessie's attention to 'that blessed child who has eaten a quart of picked fruit, Miss, if she has eaten a currant;' whereupon Bessie placed Lally on the dresser, where, in the midst of plates and dishes, the little girl sat as if on a throne, exchanging saucy speeches with Miss Ormson, till it pleased that young lady to lift her down from her perch and take her away to the hay-field, or out into the croft, to see Alick breaking-in Nellie.

It was wonderful to observe the way in which Bessie and the

child agreed ; more wonderful still, perhaps, to notice the manner in which the former wound all the household round her finger.

It was Bessie this, and Bessie that. She retrimmed the girls' bonnets ; she taught them the latest mode of dressing hair ; she could change old garments into new by some dexterous sleight-of-hand. Ribbons and laces, deemed useless before her arrival, and cast aside, as tossed and torn, reappeared after her advent in forms that delighted the hearts of Arthur Dudley's sisters.

She was 'good for everything,' the boys declared. Pretty and coquettish herself, she liked to see other girls pretty and coquettish too ; and during their visit the Misses Dudley went about with wild flowers in their hair, with dainty bouquets in their belts, with dresses guiltless of a crease, 'making much of themselves,' as Bessie phrased it.

How she revelled in that house ! How she, so constantly a prisoner among bricks and mortar, loved the freedom and the liberty of that country life ! How she stood drinking in the pure, undefiled air, that came floating over the fields and the hedgerows to her ! Much as the young Dudleys loved their home, they had not that appreciation of every flower and leaf, of every effect of light and shade, which astonished them in their guest.

Her love of the country was keen and sharp, like the relish of a half-starved man for food.

Here, at last, was a life to be desired—a life idly busy, sinlessly sensuous ;—here was a lotus land of indolent industry, bright with sunshine, where the air was full of delicious perfumes—where the days were happy and the nights calm—where the morning dawned upon a peaceful household—where the moon looked down, not upon a turbulent sea of human woes, sorrows, sins, passions, disappointments, but on the pleasant fields where the grass was springing, and the sheep lay dotted about on the soft green slopes.

The birds in the hedges, the ferns in the dells, the soft cushions of moss, which she would caress with her little hand and touch with her lips, as though such delicious greenery must be conscious of her caresses ; the branches waving in the breeze, the whirling of the pigeons in the air, the hundred sounds of the country,—all

these things had charms for Bessie which made the Dudleys find her a most appreciative and delightful companion.

Never was there such a girl for a walk, Alick Dudley thought, as Bessie Ormson. If she went out in the early morning, before the sun had risen high enough to have much power, Bessie would stop to look at the cobwebs glittering with dew-drops, at the drooping blades of wet grass, at the tears of the leaves of the dog-roses. Were it later in the day, she revelled in the luxurious warmth ; in the far-away tiled roofs peeping red from amongst sheltering trees ; in the quiet cattle ; in the hush of the noontide ; and when the afternoon stole on, and the evening shadows began to fall, she delighted in the solemn darkness of the distant woods, in the flow of beck and stream, in the figures of the labourers hieing them home across the field-paths, in the children grouped about the cottage doors.

‘It is peace,’ she was wont to say—‘perfect peace. I wonder if heaven will be like this !’

There are poets who cannot write a line of verse ; there are artists who yet lack the power to reproduce that which fills their souls with pleasure almost amounting to pain. The understanding mind and the skilful hand are not necessarily sent into the world together. The power of appreciating things lovely and beautiful is often divorced from the capacity to create or portray the lovely and the beautiful, or, rather, is not always mated with such capacity ; and although Bessie Ormson possessed no creative or imitative genius, she was yet endowed with that diviner genius—the ability to luxuriate in the thousand works of the great Creator.

And it was this faculty of perception and appreciativeness which, added to her quickness and vivacity, made Bessie such good company that no one in the length of a summer’s day could weary of her. Nothing escaped her—not a flower growing by the wayside, not a cloud fleeting across the sky, not a change of expression on a man’s face, not an unusual cadence in a familiar voice.

With all her sarcasm and frivolity, the girl’s human sympathy was intense ; and, perhaps, when the secret of most popularity is exhausted, it will be found only to exist in the fact that the man

or the woman popular can enter into and understand the moods and feelings of other men and women.

It was so with Bessie, at all events. She loved Berrie Down Hollow with a love almost amounting to passion. To her, that place was the realization of peace, happiness, home, beauty, contentment; and yet she could comprehend the natural desire of the lad who stood beside her to leave Hertfordshire and go forth to push his way in the world.

It was of that desire they had been talking as they sauntered across the fields towards North Kemms.

The hush of the first day in the week was around them and above; but still their discourse had been of the world, its prizes, its blanks, its successes, its disappointments, and the boy's cheek flushed as he spoke of how he should like to win a name and a position for himself in the great city, where the greatest part of Bessie Ormson's life had been spent.

'Of course I shall be sorry to go away from the old place,' he went on, 'to leave it and Heather; but I should feel proud to make a fortune, and bring it back to her. I should not stay away from Berrie Down for ever.'

'Yes, you would,' Bessie answered. Then, seeing him look surprised, she went on: 'You, that is, the Alick Dudley who is talking to me now, would go away, and never return. I know it is well for you to go; but still, do not think you could ever return. You will leave here a boy with a face as smooth as my own, and you will come back a man, never to hear the song of the birds with quite the same ears—never to look out over the fields and the woods with quite the same eyes—never to listen to the trees and the winds whispering quite the same words. You will go out'—from the height of her twenty-three years she looked down and told him this—'and you may come back, but the noise of the world will mingle with the old familiar sounds, and never let those sounds fall in perfect harmony on your soul more.'

And it was then they came to the Kemm, where Bessie paused to look into the stream.

'I wonder, Bessie, where you have learned all you know,' said Alick, after a pause.

‘Not out of books,’ she replied, laughing ; ‘ the truth is I know very little, except that I am very happy at Berrie Down, and shall be very sorry to leave it.’

‘Do you not expect to be happy when you leave Berrie Down?’ he asked.

‘That is not a question to be rashly answered,’ she said. ‘I may be—I may not be. Don’t you remember that game Lally plays at—blowing dandelion-down away to tell the hour? Whatever number she has arrived at, when the last feather floats off, is the time. My future depends on much such a chance ; but whether it turn out happy or unhappy, be certain I shall not sit down and bemoan myself.’

‘But surely you hope to be happy in your marriage?’ the lad suggested, hesitatingly, and yet with a degree of restrained eagerness which made Bessie smile.

‘I hope to be so, Alick,’ she answered, however, gravely ; ‘but hopes are poor houses to live in. Fact is,’ she added, in a gayer tone, ‘I know as little about my future life as you know about yours. When we are old man and old woman, we will sit down by the fireside together, and compare notes ; we will tell one another about the roads we have travelled, and the countries they led to.’

And Bessie lifted her eyes as she spoke, and looked away to the woods surrounding Mr Raidsford’s house, which mingled with those of Kemms Park.

In the after-days, the pair stood in the same spot again on just such another afternoon, and thought of that talk on their way to Kemms church.

‘We shall be very late,’ Bessie said at length ; and then they turned and pursued their way in the delicious stillness across the fields to North Kemms. It had been a freak of Bessie’s, this Sunday ramble alone with Alick to a far-away church ; but then Bessie was given to freaks, and no one paid any particular attention to them.

Mrs Ormson declared such a walk in the heat of the day ‘was absurd ;’ even Heather looked surprised when she and Alick an-

nounced their intention of starting directly after dinner. Lally had implored 'me too,' for once vainly, and an offer of companionship from the remainder of the Dudleys had met with no better success.

'I want to go alone with you, Alick,' she declared. 'I want to talk to you quietly;' and of course Alick was delighted.

Like most girls, Bessie conceived all the wisdom of Solomon had come down to her. In the ways of this world the young lady believed she was a thorough adept; but she had not that reticence in talking about the ways of the world and the wickedness of the people in it, which is, perhaps, the first sign of thorough knowledge.

The wise man is modest. The man who thinks himself wise lacks sense to hold his tongue; the saint is eloquent about sin; the sinner is not given to speak of the flavour of that strange meat whereof he has partaken; for all of which reasons Bessie, who was but a very novice in that lore wherein she aspired to instruct others, was assiduous in her endeavours to teach Alick that the world where he had been placed was a mistake, the hope of happiness in it a delusion and a snare.

This young woman, who delighted in every country sight and sound, who loved Lally and adored Heather Dudley, who luxuriated in pleasant sights and in all sweet sounds, who had her life all before her, who could take fun out of most things, and was not above confessing to a weakness for strawberries and cream, would nevertheless talk on a fine summer afternoon as I have taken the liberty of transcribing her conversation.

She thought she was original, perhaps, in her remarks; she thought also possibly—and this thought chanced to be perfectly true—that Alick Dudley delighted in her observations; and yet her talk was but as the talk of other girls of her own age and temperament throughout the length and breadth of England.

It was the nought is everything and everything is nought creed of our own girls at the present hour; of those who, whether they take refuge from their own luxuriously sad thoughts in earnestness or frivolity, in balls or soup-kitchens, in fashionable follies or

house-to-house visitings, are yet agreed on one point, viz., their conviction that the round world and all that therein is cannot be considered otherwise than hollow and unsatisfactory.

They believe fully, not only that it is all a fleeting show, but that it was 'for man's illusion given,' and they smile compassionately on the poor souls who are deluded with such a transparent mockery, and go about raving in a fine melancholy about the sins and sorrows, the snares and the pitfalls, of our very imperfect earth.

Did the girls who read *Evelina* and *Cecilia* share this doctrine, or were they, less sceptical, gulled, sweet simpletons, into believing the Almighty intended them for happiness instead of misery?

It would have been a clever person who could have persuaded Bessie Ormson into such a faith, at all events; and as, for most young people, talk of the kind to which I have referred—melancholy, dreamy, romantic, unsatisfying talk—has a singular charm, she might, with her conversation, have done Alick Dudley a considerable amount of mischief, had it not been for a little circumstance that occurred on the very same Sunday afternoon of which I am speaking, and set the lad thinking about a much more possible calamity than had been contained in any of Bessie's imaginative sentences.

On, over the fields they walked; they left the Kemm and Mr Raidsford's property far behind; they strolled leisurely through the pleasant Hertfordshire meadows, and stood here and there to watch the sheep scuttling away from them, or to notice the placid contentment of the cattle lying on the smooth grass whence the hay had just been carried.

On, past cottage and homestead; on, to where more woods met their sight; on, through the little hamlet of North Kemms, and then by a short lane to the church surrounded by a graveyard, where the mounds were many, and the headstones few.

The service was half over by the time they stood within the porch, but the sexton experienced no difficulty in providing the new comers with seats. There were more empty than full in that church, so he ushered the pair into a great family pew near the pulpit, and shut the door carefully after them.

Only to open it, however, again next instant, and give admittance to a tall handsome man, who might have belonged to the same party, so quickly did he follow on their heels.

A very handsome man—when the stranger took his face out of his hat, where he held it for the orthodox period ; Alick Dudley was quite satisfied on this point, and glanced curiously round to ascertain whether Bessie chanced to be of the same opinion ; but Bessie's eyes were fastened on her prayer-book, and so Alick turned again to the new comer to discover what effect Bessie had produced on him.

Apparently, none whatever ; he looked at the girl carelessly, looked her over from head to foot ; then examined Alick in the same supercilious and critical style, after which he surveyed the congregation at large, the clergyman, and the clerk. Then, having apparently exhausted North Kemms as Bessie had exhausted the world, he caressed his moustache, and retired into his own contemplations.

All of which proceedings piqued, not to say angered, Alick Dudley ; and this anger was the more unreasonable, because, if the stranger had seemed struck by Bessie's beauty, the lad would have been out of temper still.

But that any one should remain indifferent to Miss Ormson's perfections appeared to Alick little less than a miracle. Even the rector, an old, white-haired man, was to be detected stealing furtive looks at the demure young lady who had come so late to church ; and what right had this 'great swell,' so Alick mentally styled the stranger, to give himself airs, and never bestow a second glance on a girl who was undeniably beautiful ?

'He may meet hundreds of fine ladies before he sees anything like her,' decided Master Alick ; but the offending gentleman evidently did not share in this opinion. Wherever his thoughts might be, clearly they were not wandering in the direction of Bessie Ormson, who, on her side, never lifted her eyes to look at him, but kept them fixed resolutely on her little prayer-book, the rector, or the east window ; a piece of propriety which, considering the girl's proclivities for lords and grandees of all kinds, was somewhat astonishing.

But then, if Bessie were a trifle coquettish, she was not bold ; a maiden less likely to take the initiative in a love affair could not have been found in the length and breadth of Hertfordshire.

Which fact made it, perhaps, all the more extraordinary that the stranger took no heed of so strange a mixture of modesty and vivacity and beauty.

A handsome man, and yet not altogether of prepossessing appearance. Sitting opposite to, and staring at him with all his eyes, Alick felt he did not much like him. What had he come to church for? He sat there absorbed in his own thoughts, whatever they might be, hearing the sermon possibly, but unheeding it certainly. Vaguely, as in a dreamy kind of way, Alick conjectured the world, of which Bessie had been talking as they crossed the fields, might have some share in their companion's reverie.

The lad was gifted with sufficient sense to understand that a man like this was much more likely to know all the ins and outs of a wicked world than Miss Bessie Ormson ; and, while the rector droned through his sermon, an impression, undefined and intangible, it is true, came into Alick's mind, that, all through her wise conversation with him, Bessie had been arguing out some mental question with herself ; forecasting what the years might bring to her, wondering with what ears she should listen to the sweet home sounds again, with what eyes she should look over the green Hertfordshire fields in the future which was uncertainly stretching forth before them both.

The thoughts of youth are generally as unformed as the features of childhood ; and thus, though Alick was conscious of some curious enigma perplexing him, he yet would have been surprised had any one placed the puzzle he was considering before his mental vision, perfect in form and clothed with words.

At length it was all over—the sermon, the service, the reverie—and, with a sense of relief, the lad opened the pew door, and stood in the aisle while his companion passed out. In order to allow her to take precedence of him, the stranger had stepped a little back into the pew, and this slight courtesy Bessie acknowledged by the merest inclination of her pretty head. Then Alick saw the gentleman look at her, for an instant only—next moment

his dark eyes were roaming over the church, scanning the monuments, glancing up at the organ-loft.

When they were half down the aisle, Alick turned to see what the stranger was doing, and found him, not following Bessie with his eyes, but still scrutinizing the church as though he were a member of the Archæological Society. There he stood in the pew just as they had left him, indolently surveying roof and walls, tombs and windows. As they passed through the porch, Alick looked back once more, but the object of his curiosity had not moved.

'Waiting for the rector, perhaps,' thought the lad; and he hurried after Bessie, who by this time was half way across the graveyard.

'What a dear old church!' she said, as they reached the gate. 'I like it much better than Fifield.'

'Excuse me, but I believe this is your prayer-book,' said a voice close beside her at this juncture, and the interruption was so sudden that both Alick and his companion started to find the stranger close beside them.

'Thank you, I am sorry to have given you so much trouble; yes, it is mine,' Bessie stammered, her face covered with blushes as she received the book, which she put in her pocket; while the stranger raised his hat and turned back across the churchyard in the direction of the Rectory.

'Now, was not that stupid of me?' asked Bessie. In his heart, perhaps Alick thought it was, but he did not express this opinion, he only offered to carry the book for her.

'No, thank you, it is so small, I always keep it in my pocket,' she answered. 'If there be one thing more than another I dislike, it is to see people parading church-services and Bibles about on a Sunday as though they want to let all the world know they have been praying;' and thus Bessie rattled on while they retraced their way across the fields, and over the Kemm, and past the woods, and so to Berrie Down, which place they reached about the time when Mrs Ormson, awaking from her afternoon siesta like a giant refreshed, proposed that society generally should take a turn on the lawn.

To this proposal society, nothing loth, agreed ; and thus it chanced that Bessie and Alick were descried entering the croft and rounding the Hollow, and ascending the hill leading to the house.

Once amongst the family group, it was needful to pause and give full particulars of their walk, of North Kemms church, of the congregation, of the music, of the sermon, and of various other matters which the younger Dudleys were pleased to regard in the light of news.

By a singular coincidence, however, neither Alick nor Bessie made any mention of the strange gentleman who had turned aside towards the Rectory. The young lady, indeed, talked so much and so fast that it would have been difficult for her companion to have edged in much information on the subject, even had he felt inclined to do so.

But he did not feel inclined ; he could do little except watch Bessie, and wonder what had come to put her in such astonishing spirits, and to make her so much gayer than when they started—so utterly absorbed in giving a full and detailed account of the appearance of the rector, the prosiness of his sermon, the beauty of the walk, and the horrible discord of the choir, that she had not a moment's attention to spare for Lally, who revenged herself by coolly thrusting her little hand into the depths of Bessie's pocket, in search of those sweetmeats which her friend usually kept there for the child's special delectation and benefit.

'Not a sing,' exclaimed Lally at length, prayer-book in hand, and sorrow written on every feature in her face.

Then Bessie, breaking off in the middle of a sentence, turned and snatched the book from Lally, with a look of such blank terror, that for a second it seemed to Alick Dudley almost as though the sun had gone behind a cloud.

'Nossing for me,' remarked Lally reproachfully, and in a tone of mild expostulation against a state of society in which such things as pockets destitute of sweetmeats could be—'nossing for me?'

'You naughty child,' began Miss Ormson, sharply ; but next moment she relented, and, catching Lally up in her arms, told

her she would see whether 'Bessie had anything in her drawers for her bold little girl.'

After which, exit Bessie with Lally, the latter contemplating the family group, as she departed, over Bessie's shoulder, and staying her appetite by thrusting three of her fingers as far down her throat as was compatible with personal safety.

Once in her own room, Bessie, after finding the sweetmeats, turned them and Lally out of the apartment, locked her door, and then eagerly opened her prayer-book.

Had Heather Dudley been on the threshold, she might well have marvelled what calamity had happened to the girl. She shook the book, she fluttered over the leaves; she turned her pocket inside out, she lifted her handkerchief, she inspected the carpet, she examined the prayer-book again, then she walked to the door, unlocked and opened it, to meet Alick Dudley on the threshold.

'Is this yours?' he asked, giving her a sealed note. 'It dropped from the prayer-book when Lally pulled it out of your pocket. I picked it up, but I did not like to give it to you on the lawn.'

'You dear, good boy,' she said; but Alick never smiled at this praise. His face was as pale as Bessie's was red, his tone as quiet as hers was hurried.

For a moment the pair looked at each other, then she said:

'Alick, may I trust that you will not tell Heather?'

'I will tell nothing,' he answered. She put her hand into his, but he never clasped the little soft fingers. Involuntarily almost she put her lips to his and kissed him, but still the lad made no sign.

Then she broke out passionately, 'Don't judge me hardy, Alick; don't judge me till you know all.'

'I do not judge you, Bessie,' he replied, 'but I am very sorry; and there came a mist before his eyes, through which he could not see her distinctly, and he turned and walked away along the corridor, feeling he had that day got his first real lesson in deceit and hypocrisy.

He had believed in Bessie; he had listened to her talk; with delight and wonder she had seemed to him walking in the golden

sunlight like something too good for the every-day, common, work-a-day world, and, behold! she was but a hypocrite playing in Heather's house a double game.

Yes, he knew now the world she had come from must be a wicked place, when such things as this were possible in it. He had been deceived, and straight away he thought of Delilah and Samson, putting up his hand to his mouth the while to feel if those where really the lips Bessie had kissed.

In her fear and humiliation she had offered him this bribe; when he thought of that, his anger melted away into a great flood of shame and pity, and then the lad whom this girl, his senior by nearly five years, was teaching so rapidly to be a man, turned into his own room, where, covering his face with his hands, he cried like a child.

After all, he was very young and very inexperienced, and he found it hard to see the dream-castle he had built on so frail a foundation as a woman's truth and purity levelled to the ground.

There comes a time when such knowledge, as had been vouchsafed to Alick Dudley that day, provokes smiles rather than tears.

When a man has arrived at the conclusion that all women are weak, that all women are frail, it is rather gratifying to his penetration than otherwise when beauty confirms this view of the question; but Alick Dudley had not commenced travelling along the road which leads to this pleasant opinion, and it was very grievous to him to find his idol had feet of clay, that she had been making a cat's-paw of him, that the stranger and she knew more of each other than was well for either, that she had fallen in a moment so low as not to be above bribing him with a kiss.

And at that point the lad grew dizzy and confused. There was a great mystery being developed in his heart at the moment. He could not have put that mystery into words; but I may for him. The ideal he had idolized lay at his feet, broken and shattered, marred, ruined, and defaced; but the reality which occupied its place—a weak, deceitful, unhappy girl—he loved.

CHAPTER VII.

MORE VISITORS.

AND still the summer days ran on. They rippled by, scarcely murmuring as they passed; and life at Berrie Down flowed smoothly along, leaving no mark or trace behind.

The flowers faded, and fresh flowers bloomed; the cherries were all shaken down; the haymaking was over; the blackberries in the Hollow were forming so rapidly that Lally's little fingers had to be forbidden plucking the unripe fruit; the noon-tides were hot and sultry; every blossom was gone from the chestnuts; the shade in Berrie Down Lane was sweet and pleasant, and both pedestrians and equestrians loved to linger there under the trees, on the soft grass by the roadside. There was the purple haze on the distant woods, and in the nearer valleys; the leaves had lost their fresh greenness, and looked in want of rain; the Kemm was reduced to a mere thread of a stream; and the rivulet which meandered through the fields beyond the Hollow was utterly dried up.

Arthur Dudley was beginning to complain loudly of the drought. He spoke of impending loss of cattle; of the probability of the after-grass being all scorched up; of failure in the turnips; but no one paid much attention to his forebodings excepting Heather and Mrs Ormson.

There was this difference, however, between the two women, that, while the latter condoled with him, the former endeavoured to make him believe matters would not turn out so badly as he feared.

Comforters are not generally so much liked as sympathizers, and it was therefore with Mrs Ormson Arthur walked around the fields, bemoaning his usual ill-luck as they paced along.

'It was like my fortune to have so many cattle in such a season,' he grumbled. 'Any other year it would not have mattered; but this'—and so the Squire wandered on, while Mrs Ormson said it was 'dreadful,' and gently hinted that the arrangement of the

weather, like the arrangement of many other things, was not so perfect as it might be.

‘Now, what do we want with rain in London?’ she inquired; ‘and yet you know it is always pouring there. How much better it would be if you could have the rain instead! I dare say, if the truth were known, it is coming down there in torrents at this very moment.’

But in this supposition Mrs Ormson chanced to be wrong, as successive visitors from London arrived in due time to testify.

‘How delightful to get into the country out of those suffocating streets!’ remarked Mrs Black, a woman of the utterly feeble, limp, languid, and mildly pretty school. ‘Oh, Arthur, how I *envy* you this sweet spot!’

In answer to which speech Arthur declared that, if she knew all, perhaps she would find less cause for envy than she imagined. Whereupon Mr Black, a stout, middle-aged, light-haired, florid, good-looking, self-satisfied individual, observed:

‘Yes, that is what I always say, Dudley—my very words, almost. Nobody knows where the shoe pinches but the man who has to walk through life in it. And, after all, though the country is very nice, and Berrie Down a refreshing change from the city in such melting weather, still we all know it is not London. ‘No,’ repeated Mr Black, striking the sod with the heel of his boot, and looking over the landscape as though daring the fields and the trees to contradict him, ‘it is not London.’

‘And a very good thing too it is not,’ added Bessie; in answer to which addendum Mr Black stated his belief that she was just the same as ever, and inquired how, if she disliked town so much, she expected to be able to spend her life in it.

‘As I have done hitherto,’ she replied, ‘under protest.’

‘Persuade Gilbert when he comes down to turn farmer,’ suggested Mrs Black, sentimentally. ‘I only wish my lot had been cast among these peaceful scenes.’

The only comment this remark elicited being a muttered sentence from Mr Black, in which Bessie thought she heard something about ‘peaceful devils,’ the conversation might have been con-

sidered ended, but for a voluntary statement from Master Marsden, a young gentleman in knickerbockers, to the effect that he hated London, but that the country was jolly. He had been down in Surrey in the spring, he went on to inform the assembled company in a shrill alto, where he robbed fifty—oh! a hundred—birds' nests, and wasn't it prime!

'Then you were wicked boy,' said Miss Lally, with that charming promptitude of judgment which is a peculiarity of her sex.

'Why? don't you rob nests?' asked the new arrival, in answer to which question Lally shook her comical little head gravely.

'Well, you must be a muff; but then, to be sure, you are a girl,' said Master Marsden, in a tone which was at once contemptuous and explanatory.

'She is not a great ill-mannered boy like you, Harry, at any rate,' observed Bessie, whose fault certainly was not reticence in expressing her sentiments.

'I don't want you to talk to me, I don't,' said the boy, turning upon her in a manner which spoke of former passages of arms between them.

'Well, it is not every one who gets more than he wants,' she replied; at which juncture Mr Black called the young lady to order, declaring the way she talked to the boy too bad—'just like breaking a thingumderry upon a whatever's its name.'

'If you mean a butterfly upon a wheel, I beg to remark that Harry is as unlike a butterfly as anything I can imagine,' answered Miss Bessie.

'We don't expect little boys to be butterflies,' said that general peacemaker, Mrs Black.

'No, it is great girls who are that,' struck in Mr Black; and he laughed at his own wit so long and loudly, that Lally stood looking at him in astonishment.

'Well, little one, and what are you staring at?' inquired Mr Black, at length noticing that Lally had opened not merely her eyes but also her mouth as wide as possible.

'Oo,' was the immediate reply

‘Oh! indeed; and what do you think of me now you have stared?’ he asked.

‘I think ’oo like Doe Cole,’ replied Lally, nothing abashed at public attention being directed to her.

‘And who may Joe Cole be?’ persisted Mr Black; but no one seemed disposed to afford him the information he desired.

‘Who is this Joe Cole that I resemble?’ repeated Mr Black, looking round the circle, and especially at Bessie, who had her face buried in her pocket-handkerchief.

Round the circle, too, looked Lally. ‘He’s a fool,’ she explained, evidently desirous of enlightening Mr Black’s ignorance. Alick had raised a warning finger too late; out came the sentence in the middle of a dead silence; and then Bessie burst into a perfect scream of laughter; while Arthur, in angry tones, exclaimed, ‘Take that child away, somebody. She’s not fit to be among civilized people.’

‘Ought to be whipped, and sent to bed,’ volunteered Mrs Ormson.

‘Poor little thing traced some fancied resemblance,’ urged Mrs Black, as an extenuating circumstance.

‘She is completely ruined,’ said her father; and as the child passed him, led off the field by Bessie, he struck her, for the first time in his life, a smart blow, which caused Lally to break forth into a perfect paroxysm of grief.

In one moment Bessie had her in her arms, and faced round on the Squire. ‘I never had a greater mind to do anything than box your ears, Arthur,’ she remarked. ‘I shall say you are like Joe Cole next;’ and with that Miss Ormson swept away from the group, followed by some of the younger Dudleys, who were unanimously of opinion the matter was to be kept from Heather.

‘I am so sorry, Bessie—oh! I am so sorry,’ said Agnes Dudley.

‘And so am I that all these people are here,’ Bessie answered. ‘They will spoil Arthur among them, not that, goodness knows, there is much to spoil about him.’

‘It is always the same whenever Mr Black comes,’ continued Agnes. ‘I can remember how we used to dread the very sight of him or your mother entering the gates. I suppose I ought not to

say it, Bessie, as she is your mother ; but she always made things worse for us here, at least we thought she did.'

'Don't let the fact of her being my mother prevent your expressing your opinions,' said Bessie, who, seated on the floor in the nursery, was engaged in striving to comfort Lally. Most sincerely she hoped and believed Heather was, at that moment, closeted with Mrs Piggott ; but Heather happened to be in an adjoining room, and, hearing the sound of Lally's exceeding bitter grief, came in to see what could be the cause of it.

'Why, what is the matter with my pet?' she asked.

Agnes looked at Bessie, who promptly answered, 'Lally has been very naughty.'

'No, Lally not been naughty,' broke in the child, stretching out her arms towards her mother. 'Lally only said that fat man was like Doe Cole—and pa hit her—pa did ;' and Lally buried her head in her mother's breast, and wept abundantly.

'Arthur did not mean to hurt her,' Agnes explained.

'And Lally was very naughty, for she said Joe Cole was a fool,' added Bessie ; but, unheeding both the girl's statements, Heather passed from the room, carrying Lally with her, and appeared no more until supper-time, when Bessie noticed that she had been crying.

'I wish you would keep that child of yours out of the way of strangers till she has learnt how to behave herself,' Arthur remarked from the foot of the table, with his customary tact and consideration.

'She shall not annoy any one again,' said Heather, who had intended to take a private opportunity of apologizing to Mr Black for Lally's seeming rudeness.

'Oh ! she did not annoy me, ma'am,' returned that gentleman. 'Considered it rather a compliment than otherwise, I assure you. You know the saying, I dare say, that it takes a wise man to act the fool ; and I rather think any one who tried to get the better of me would find he had no fool to deal with, Mrs Dudley.'

'When I was at school, uncle, we had a copy text to the effect that "Self-praise was no recommendation,"' remarked Bessie ; at which speech some of the younger Dudleys tittered audibly—a

proceeding that caused Arthur to declare he did not know what the house was coming to.

'It is a very charming house,' interposed Mrs Black, who really, Heather felt, was a perfect blessing to society. 'I do not know a house like it anywhere. Every one amongst my friends has heard of Berrie Down Hollow. I always say it seems to me the very abode of peace,—the true cottage of contentment.'

'I would very gladly exchange it for your house in town,' answered Arthur.

'Or for the same acreage in town,' added Mr Black. 'By Jove, if a man had only one of your fields anywhere about Threadneedle Street or Cornhill, he might snap his fingers at the world.'

'Yes; because in that case he would be so rich he could afford to live anywhere,' ventured Heather, to whom such remarks were by no means new; 'but, as the land is not in London, why need we think about impossibilities? It is a choice with us between a small income in town and a small income in the country; and you know, Mr Black, how much farther a small income goes in the country than in town.'

'Now that is just the point on which you are so much deceived,' replied Mr Black. 'There is no place on earth where a small income can be made go so far as in London. Do you want meat? You can have what you want, cut as you like, sent home on the instant. Now here, I suppose, your butcher lives five miles off; everything is at least five miles off in the country. For rich and poor alike, London is the place. What is there a man can't get there?'

'Green fields,' answered Mrs Black.

'Green fields! nonsense,' returned her husband. 'Have not you the parks? What can a human being desire better than St James's Park, or Regent's Park, or even Victoria? Is not there grass enough in them to content you? Is Hampstead Heath not big enough for you to walk over? Have not you the squares? Have not you trees? Even in the City there is not a street but you may see a tree in it. Do you want amusement? there is not a night but you may go to a dozen places of amusement, if you like. Do you want society? you can have as much as you please. Do

you want books? they lie ready to your hand. Everything is next door in London. We have not to send a dozen miles for a lemon there, ma'am, as Mr Whatever-you-may-call-him, that parson fellow, said he had to do. From grapes at thirty shillings a pound to a farthing's worth of tea-dust, you can be accommodated in London. There is no place like it on earth, Mrs Dudley, take my word.'

Poor Mrs Dudley sighed, and answered 'that, for her part, she liked the pure country air.'

'There never was a more mistaken idea than that,' said Mr Black. 'Country air is not pure. How should it be, with its decomposing vegetation, with its damp fields, with its ditches filled with grass and dead leaves, with its arable land covered with natural and artificial manures, with its imperfect drainage, with its impure water? Read the Registrar-General's returns, and you will soon change your opinion about the healthfulness of the country.'

'That is what I often say,' remarked Mrs Ormson.

'But still there are some most unpleasant smells in London,' observed Mrs Black, feebly.

'In Bermondsey, for instance,' added Bessie.

'All healthy,' persisted Mr Black. 'Now, in the country, people breathe poison without knowing what they are swallowing. What is called pure air is very like sparkling water; it seems so because it is full of the seeds of disease, because it is literally laden with decomposition and—'

'The eight o'clock express stops at Palinsbridge, uncle,' suggested Bessie at this point. 'You might catch it if you were to sit up all night, and start away from here, say, at five o'clock in the morning. I should not stay another day in the country, if I were you.'

'Well put in, Bessie; but I won't take your advice for all that,' said Mr Black, good-humouredly. 'I have come down here meaning to enjoy myself, and to make a complete holiday of it.'

'I should have thought you might have compassed both ends, by spending a day at the British Museum,' remarked Miss Ormson.

'How sharp you have got, Bessie, my dear,' ventured Mrs Black. 'Is it anything in the air, I wonder?'

‘If it be, it is to be hoped you will take it,’ observed her husband. At which speech Mr Black laughed and Mrs Ormson laughed, while Heather looked at her guests, blankly wondering how she was to preserve peace amongst them.

‘Gilbert will soon be down to keep Bessie in order,’ remarked Mrs Ormson.

‘I am glad to hear it—he is a very nice young fellow,’ affirmed Mr Black.

‘I have never seen him,’ said Arthur Dudley.

‘Then you will be pleased when you do see him,’ answered the oracle; a very intelligent, modest, well-mannered, pushing young man as any I know.’

‘And handsome too,’ added Mrs Black, glad to find some smooth water where she could safely launch her little conversational boat again without fear of breakers. ‘And handsome too; and oh! so good to his mother and sisters.’

‘I liked him greatly,’ said Heather, from her end of the table; and, as she spoke, almost involuntarily she glanced at Bessie, who, with her head turned aside, was looking out into the semi-darkness of the summer’s night.

Alick had his eyes fixed on Bessie also. Perhaps he was trying to reconcile the fact of Gilbert Harcourt with the existence of the stranger they had met in North Kemms church. Anyhow, he felt curious, and, though Heather knew nothing about the North Kemms stranger, she had grown curious also.

In due time Mr Harcourt arrived, as did also Miss Hope, and then, indeed, the house was full—so full that Bessie privately likened it to a Noah’s Ark, and wondered how the patriarch managed to keep his animals in order.

‘It is more than poor Heather can do,’ sighed Alick.

‘What makes her have them?’ asked Bessie.

‘Do you think Arthur would be satisfied if she had not?’ inquired the lad. ‘It is just the same every year, only, unhappily, this year they have all elected to come together.’

‘I am one of the “all,” Alick, remember,’ she said, laughing.

There had been a time when Alick would indignantly have

denied this assertion ; but he remembered North Kemms church, and held his peace.

‘You are angry with me,’ she went on, noticing his hesitation. ‘Perhaps, if you knew everything, you would be sorry.’ And, with that, Bessie turned and walked into the house, leaving Alick, who certainly did not know everything, in a state of wonderment.

Why should he be sorry for Bessie ? For himself he might feel sorry that two men stood between him and the prize he had vaguely began to covet ; but where was the need of pitying her ? If she did not like Gilbert, why had she accepted him ? If she did like him, why had she gone to North Kemms to meet another lover ?

But was he a lover ? Alick had read a sufficient number of old romances obtained from Miss Carfort, who kept a very small circulating library in South Kemms, to be well aware that the walk across the fields, the evidently pre-arranged meeting, the note secreted between the leaves of Bessie’s prayer-book, did not of themselves justify him in the conclusion that Miss Ormson was carrying on a clandestine love affair. The man might have some hold on her. He might have known her before her engagement to Gilbert ; he might have some power over her father ; he might be in possession of some secret of the family : so the lad argued ; but still the conviction remained strong within him that Bessie was playing a double game ; though how she contrived to do so puzzled him beyond measure.

No more walks across the fields ; no lonely excursions to Fifield post-office ; no solitary rambles, even within the limits of the farm.

It might not perhaps be generous on his part to do so, but he watched the young lady as a cat might watch a mouse, and the more he watched the more mystified he grew.

If she were carrying on a secret correspondence with any one, it was impossible she could treat Gilbert Harcourt as she did. From morning till night the pair were together ‘like a pair of dear turtle-doves,’ as Mrs Black sentimentally declared. Never a cross word did Bessie bestow on her betrothed ; never a saucy speech did she address to him. Let who else would, feel the sharpness of her

tongue—and it was sharp at times, as a serpent's tooth, according to Mrs Ormson ; and a wasp's sting, to quote Mr Black—Mr Harcourt always escaped scot-free.

Not even to Heather was Bessie so uniformly agreeable as to Mr Harcourt ; and another strange thing Alick noticed came to pass about the same time—Bessie ceased in her conversation to be either sententious or melancholy.

In Mr Harcourt's presence she never spoke about desiring to ripple by, like the Kemm ; she never talked concerning the world's barrenness ; about the dreariness of human life.

The lover had come, and Mariana no longer cried, ' I am a-weary.' The lover had come, and she discoursed before him much after the fashion of other people. If the later fashion seemed to Alick less attractive than that formerly adopted by her, who can say the fashion was not a better one—more fitted for every-day wear ?

But Alick was young, and liked sentiment. As our mothers, when girls, used to luxuriate in Mrs Hemans' poetry, so Alick had revelled in Bessie's talk, concerning the world and life, and the arid dreariness of both.

To Mr Harcourt, however, who hoped for some small share of happiness in existence, whose career had not been a smooth one, who loved rather to hear of the bright sunshine than of winter's clouds, Bessie's poetical reveries would have been utterly distasteful ; and as the young lady anxiously laid herself out to please him in other matters, so she anxiously selected her talk to suit his tastes. No one on earth could have proved a more submissive mistress than Bessie Ormson ; to those who were learned in the ways of women she might have seemed a trifle too submissive for everything in the engagement to be right.

As for Heather, she delighted in seeing matters progress so smoothly. With a half-jealous feeling gnawing at her heart, she watched, during her rare moments of leisure, Gilbert's devotion to the lady of his choice. What a lover he appeared in Heather's eyes ! with what an ever-increasing pain she saw him follow Bessie about ; fearful lest the very winds of heaven should touch her too roughly. How tender he was ; how thoughtful ; how mindful of her lightest wish ; how his face brightened when she entered the

room ; with what looks of pride and affection he followed her about !

It was all a wonderful revelation to the woman who had never experienced such devotion ; who was becoming conscious that in the book of her own existence some of the sweetest pages of most lives had never been penned ; who had never known, till she beheld love showered upon another, that such love had never been proffered to her. It was so wonderful a revelation, in fact, that she could not help remarking one day to Miss Hope :—

‘How very fond Mr Harcourt must be of Bessie !’

‘Yes,’ answered that lady, who was surveying the pair through her eye-glass,—‘he seems to like her well enough ; more than she is worth, in my opinion. He is fonder of her than she is of him. She is only marrying him for a home, my dear.’

‘For a home !’ repeated Heather, in amazement.

‘Yes—or to get away from home, if you prefer that way of putting it. The match will not turn out well. Remember, I said so ;’ and Miss Hope took another look at the engaged couple, while Heather’s thoughts flew back to the words Bessie had spoken as they stood together side by side on the grassy slope with their backs turned towards the west : ‘I wish I were more worthy his devotion ;’ and of that other more vehement sentence spoken later on during the course of the same evening, when the girl said : ‘If you tell me to do it this minute, I will stay with you all my life and never marry any one.’

At this juncture Miss Hope dropped her eyeglass once again, and, turning to Heather, said : ‘Yes, my dear, it is clear as noon-day (noonday anywhere out of England), that on the young lady’s part it is a marriage of convenience. How shocked you look ! Where have your eyes been not to find out the real state of matters for yourself ? I suspected it at the first glance ; but then, you and I are two very different people ; you are the stupidest, simplest goose I ever had the happiness of meeting.’

And the old lady laid her hand on her niece’s shoulder with a not unkindly gesture.

Wise old ladies occasionally take fancies to such stupid, simple young geese as Heather Dudley ; and Miss Hope, who knew Arthur better, perhaps, than anybody in the world, felt sorry for

the wife, whose lot, it was impossible for her to avoid seeing, had not been cast in pleasant places.

But what, you may ask, did that matter, if Heather herself were unconscious of the fact?

My reader, do you think the blind man, born blind, can yet remain ignorant for ever that others are able to look on the blue heavens and the green earth? Do you think the mute comes in due time to have no comprehension that his fellows enjoy a gift withheld from him? Do you imagine the deaf have no understanding of all which has been denied to them? Do you suppose the childless never listen for the sound of little feet that God has decreed shall patter across no floor towards their arms outstretched to greet them? Do you believe the spinster never considers what her lot might have been, when she looks around and sees other women happily married, and sitting by no lonely fires, as she is doomed to do, through the years, the long, solitary, uneventful years? Do you not understand that in due time the eye must behold, and the heart long—that the fruit eaten so many thousand years ago by our common mother, *must* be tasted sooner or later in its bitterness by all who are born of woman, and who would attain to the full stature of man?

On the branches of the tree still hangs that which gives knowledge of good and evil; and till the hand have grasped, and the mind received, no life can be called perfect, no human being become as a god, comprehending, not merely the mystery of good and evil, but also all the joy and all the sorrow which that mystery involves.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN HEATHER'S DRESSING-ROOM.

TAKEN as a whole, the incongruous ingredients brought together at Berrie Down Hollow did not form a peculiarly agreeable social dish. In one respect it might have been called a kind of haggis,

but the result proved that what may be made palatable in cookery cannot always be tried domestically.

The oatmeal and the vegetables, the mincemeat and the savoury stuffing, refused to amalgamate at the daily dinner-table, and, as is usual in such cases, each guest thought the absence of his neighbours the only thing needed to ensure perfect comfort and happiness at the board.

It is a way people have—this of thinking all God's creatures bores excepting themselves—of imagining certain pleasant places on earth were made for their especial delectation, and that every other man, woman, or child, who sets foot within the enclosure, should be ousted out, and prosecuted for trespass.

There are common lands on which the majority of mankind may browse if they will, but they must leave the sunny green slopes, the sweet clover-fields, the well-fenced paddock, for the gratification and comfort of the elect ; and perhaps the most curious social problem of the day is to notice how, amongst saints and sinners alike, one common idea prevails,—the former believing they have a right to heaven, the latter that they have a right to earth.

Each saint thinks that other saints have no right or title to be pushing themselves forward into the heavenly kingdom ; each sinner thinks his fellow-sinner should remain at home, and not strive to gain an entrance where he is most decidedly *de trop*.

Any one who has noticed the disgust of this world's elect at the sight of any one whom they do not chance to like, seated opposite to them at dinner, will have no difficulty in understanding how hard it would be to get into heaven, if man had any power in the matter of rejection or selection. Easier a thousand times for a camel to pass through the needle's eye, than for him who was judged by his fellow to obtain ingress there.

It is not profane to argue from analogy, even on sacred subjects, and when we see how man would deal with man in life, it is not difficult to guess how man would deal, if he could, with man after death.

'Me—me—place for me ! make room for me ! you surely care for me ! you will certainly be glad to see me !' is the cry here ;

and is it too much to assume that in the secret souls of men it is the cry for hereafter?

I am certain it was so at all events with Heather's guests: if they could have kept each other, not merely out of Berrie Down, but out of heaven, they would have done it.

To say that Miss Hope hated the entire of the Cuthbert connection would be to use too mild a word. To say that Mr and Mrs Black, Mrs Ormson, and Miss Ormson, stank in her nostrils, and that the younger Dudleys stank likewise, though with a lesser offensiveness, would fail to convey an idea of the state of the lady's real feelings on the subject of her brother-in-law's second marriage; whilst by Mrs Black, Mrs Ormson, Bessie, and the younger Dudleys, Miss Hope's dislike was returned with ample interest—honestly paid in kind.

But not here did the dislikes end. With all her heart Mrs Black wished her sister, Mrs Ormson, at the antipodes; while with all Mrs Ormson's heart she wished, not merely Mrs Black, but also her own husband, Mr Ormson, at New Zealand. If the gods had known much about human nature—which, judging from results, we may conclude they do not—they would have mated Mr Black with Mrs Ormson, Mr Ormson with Mrs Black.

'There would have been the wife for me,' Mr Black stated one day, in strict confidence, to Heather, 'but she was secured, ma'am—snapped up.'

How badly off Heather thought mankind must have been for wives, when two of the sex considered Mrs Ormson a desirable helpmeet, she did not deem it needful to state. One virtue of Arthur Dudley's wife was, that she knew when to hold her tongue—an incalculable advantage in a woman, when such silence does not arise from indifference or stupidity: Heather was neither indifferent nor stupid, but she possessed that one great gift of discretion, without which, as Solomon says (and we may safely consider him an authority), 'beauty is to a woman but as a jewel in a swine's snout.'

And Heaven knows there was need both for discretion and patience, in those days, at Berrie Down!

There are some people with whom everybody can agree, and

Heather, unhappily for herself, chanced to be of that exceptional number.

If Mrs Ormson did not like her—and she did not, for the simple and explicit reason, as she informed all whom it might concern, that Mrs Dudley ‘was not one of her sort’—still she was quite unable to resist taking her into her confidence, and telling her all Mr Ormson’s shortcomings, all Bessie’s delinquencies, all her maternal anxieties, all Mrs Black’s follies, all the young Marsdens’ sins, all the indignities which Miss Hope had heaped upon the devoted head of the late Squire Dudley’s second wife.

‘Just as she would treat you, if you had not a spirit of your own,’ finished Mrs Ormson, which speech was the more amusing, as Heather, unhappily, had not a spirit of her own, but let the whole party trample over her at their own sweet wills.

Then Mrs Black would, in her weak, limp way, intrude on Heather’s only really quiet hour, by knocking at her dressing-room door, and asking if she might come in for a comfortable chat, ‘for really everything seems so peaceful when I am here with you alone, that I could stay up-stairs for ever ;’ an arrangement, the very mention of which filled Heather’s heart with a terrible despair.

After a time Bessie would, much to Mrs Black’s chagrin, appear on the stage, and offer to dress Mrs Dudley’s hair,—an offer Heather always gladly accepted, since Bessie’s chatter seemed infinitely preferable to Mrs Black’s inane repinings.

‘Lord bless me, aunt,’ Miss Ormson was won’t to say, with a vehemence of expression which afforded a strong contrast to the sentimental discourses concerning her own life and lives in general that had delighted Alick Dudley, ‘what do you want that you have not got? If I had your money,’ with a strong emphasis on the personal pronouns, ‘and no children’ (this fact was very fennel in the cup of Mrs Black’s existence), ‘I would enjoy myself, see if I would not.’

‘Ah, Bessie!’ Mrs Black was wont to reply, ‘money is all very well while it lasts, and it does not last long, you know, but sympathy is better.’

‘Oh, bother sympathy!’ Bessie replied—if she had been a man

she would have said something a great deal stronger—‘ what good is it, and what do you want people to sympathize about ? ’

‘ When you are married, child, perhaps you will know,’ answered Mrs Black, vaguely ; whereupon Bessie asserted :

‘ If any husband bullied me, aunt, as uncle bullies you, I would soon let him know the difference. He would not care to try the experiment with me twice.’

‘ It is easy for you to talk,’ said Mrs Black, feebly.

‘ Not in the least easier than it would be for me to act,’ answered Bessie, strong in her youth and health, giving various pulls to Heather’s hair during the course of the conversation, which might be considered as special marks of admiration, put in to attract Mrs Dudley’s notice. ‘ I’d like to see my mother submit to the one-half you bear. Believe me, aunt, Griseldas are not thought much of by modern husbands. If any Griselda of the present day went home “smockless,”—that is, if such a thing would be tolerated by our “intelligent” police,—she might stay smockless all the days of her life afterwards, whilst her liege lord committed bigamy, or flaunted about with some other woman clothed in velvets and satins.’

‘ I do not know what you are talking about, Bessie,’ Mrs Black would make answer.

‘ About a certain Griselda, who was, as Lally says, “a fool,” and lived in verse—how many centuries ago, Heather ? ’

‘ How should I tell ? ’ asked Mrs Dudley.

‘ Say eight or ten, that is near enough,’ went on Bessie. ‘ She was a woman, and her husband a man. Like many women, she was, as I have said, a fool, and he, like many men, was a brute. There you have the whole story, aunt ; and it reads a trifle like your own.’

‘ But, my dear Bessie, your uncle is not a brute,’ ventured Mrs Black.

‘ I am delighted to hear it,’ Bessie answered.

‘ He is a little rough, to be sure,’ Mrs Black went on, ‘ and has no appreciation, no sympathy, as I said before ; but, while he has money, if he could clothe me in cloth of gold, he would do it.’

'You may be very glad he cannot,' answered Bessie, 'for cloth of gold would be not merely very expensive, but also very unbecoming.'

'How you talk, child!'

'Good gracious, aunt! what do you think my tongue was given to me for, except to talk?' asked the young lady. And so on, and so on, till Heather, sometimes amused, but far oftener wearied, would entreat Mrs Black to take Bessie away with her, to which little *ruse* Bessie lent herself, not unwillingly, throwing back a look at Mrs Dudley, which said, as plainly as a look could say, 'You would let me stay, if it were not to get rid of her.'

'How can you think of allowing those people to pester you as they do?' this was Miss Hope; 'you are far too amiable; if I were mistress here, you would see whether they should torment me. I would make use of them instead. Each of the aunts should have one of the girls constantly with her on a visit, and Mr Black and Mr Ormson should take the two boys into their respective offices. The boys do not wish to be with their uncles, is that what you say? Well, Heather, I really do wonder at your weakness. What have the boys' wishes to do in the matter? Is Arthur to keep them for ever? Are they never to go out into the world, and try to earn an honest living? Are you to have your house full of another woman's children all your life, and be worried to death with them?'

'Please not to talk like that, Miss Hope,' Heather said, piteously; 'the children must go some day, I know, but without them Berrie Down will never seem the same Berrie Down to me.'

'Do you mean to say you like having them here?' Miss Hope inquired, with a gradual crescendo.

'You do not know what they have been to me,' Heather answered, the colour coming up into her face, as it always did when she was either excited or distressed. 'They have been assistants, comforts, companions, friends! As for Alick'—here the sweet, low voice faltered—'he has been my very right hand; he has thought for me, worked for me. I have had but to wish a thing, and if Alick heard, and it were possible to accomplish, I never

wished vainly. He is going : it is right he should. I have striven for him to go ; but I shall feel lost without him. Already it is to me as though some one in the house were dying.'

Miss Hope solaced herself with a chocolate cream at this point. As some people take snuff, so Arthur Dudley's aunt took chocolate. Apparently it stimulated her thoughts, for she said :

'You are an original, if ever there were one.'

'Do you think I do not mean what I say ?' asked Heather, uncertain what the observation implied. 'Do you think I do not love my husband's brothers and sisters ? Do you imagine any woman ever found such brothers and sisters before—such bright, willing helpers—such unselfish, loving, cheerful boys and girls ?'

'I think, my dear, any person who could not be happy with you could not be happy with any one. You certainly are a very sweet creature—don't blush, or, yes, rather do, it is becoming to you. I saw a face exactly like yours in a studio at Rome last year. Did you ever know an artist of the name of Whiteman ? No ?—ah ! then he could not have fallen in love with you in years gone by, and be making money out of your beauty now. What did that murmur mean ?—that you are not beautiful ? Stuff ! Excuse me, but it is stuff ! I suppose you will allow that I know a pretty face when I see it ? and I declare you are beautiful—twenty times more so than Bessie Ormson, whom I should not have in the house an hour, if I were in your shoes.'

'I like Bessie greatly,' Heather remarked.

'Of course you do—you like every one—a flirty, flighty miss, who would take up with your favourite Alick if there were no other man in the way, or with Arthur, or—'

'Why, Arthur and she never speak a civil word to each other,' Mrs Dudley objected.

'That is the way with all those kind of people—they begin with quarrelling and end by loving. Of course, you know your own business best ; but I would not have her here. I am sure I have heard of such things, and Arthur is such a weak simpleton !'

'Miss Hope !'

'Don't be indignant, my dear. Before ever you knew Arthur I knew him, and what I say is true. He is even so weak that he

has not the remotest idea what a treasure of a wife fate sent him. Arthur is amiable enough, and headstrong enough, in some things ; but still I would not trust him too far. Look how Mrs Ormson winds him round her finger ! Well, if Bessie were to change her tactics, and humour him, she might—'

'It is not right of you,' interrupted Heather. 'Indeed, Miss Hope, it is not right ; you should not say such things of my husband and your nephew ; and as for that poor innocent girl—'

'Innocent !' interposed Miss Hope, in her turn. 'An innocent that could buy and sell you, and me too—ay, and make money out of both of us ! I would have none of her. Not but what the girl is an amusing enough companion, and clever too ; and if she had loved this man—this Gilbert Harcourt—and settled down, she might have become, in her station, a respectable enough member of society ; but she does not care for him—there's the misery.'

'I cannot imagine what makes you think Bessie does not care for him,' persisted Heather.

'I imagine what my eyes tell me to be the truth, and nothing more,' answered Miss Hope. 'She is too anxious to please him, far too careful of what she says, much too ready to do what he asks her, keeps that sweet temper of hers too much under—is, in fact, much too good and saintlike for a happy young woman. Why, my dear, they ought to have tiffs and sulking fits, quarrels and reconciliations—to part eternally one hour, and be kissing like a couple of stupids the next. But why do I talk like this to you, who have gone through it all yourself?'

Heather made no answer, but, turning a little towards the window, removed her face from Miss Hope's observation. Had she gone through it ; had she ever held such a power over Arthur as this indicated ; had she herself ever gone through the heat and cold, the crater and the snowdrift ; had she ever smiled those smiles, and wept those tears, which a woman only smiles and weeps when she is dreaming her love-dreams ; was this mystery, which she had been groping about after blindly for years, going to be revealed to her at last ; was what Miss Hope said true ; was the love-play that she saw acted out every hour before her eyes, true but as regarded one of the performers in it ? If it were so, what then had

that play been which decided the fate of her own life—a farce, a tragedy—which? Was light, after the blessed darkness of years, only breaking to reveal to her this? Were other human lives but mirrors reflecting back the sad, pitiful face of her own married experience? What had come to her—what was coming to her? Knowledge! and, with an undefined dread of what knowledge might bring with it, Heather, standing by the open window, looking adown the smooth green slope, and so away to the far still country lying off in the distance, silently prayed that she might hear and understand no more—that as knowledge had come so late, it might never come at all.

It was growing upon her that Arthur did not love her—had never loved her. Everybody said he did not guess how good a wife had fallen to his share; and little as, in her modesty, she believed there was to call ‘good’ about her, still Heather thought that if Arthur really cared for her he would overrate rather than underrate her better qualities, and try to be satisfied with her endeavours to please him.

Instead of which, let her do what she would, Arthur found fault; before strangers, too, who took her part, and thus drove the nail home.

‘I cannot think what has changed him so much,’ the poor wife thought, her eyes filled with tears that prevented her seeing any object distinctly. ‘He used to be so different;’ which was true to this extent, namely, that the writing on Arthur Dudley’s mind had remained almost undistinguishable till it came to be passed through the social fire, which made every character traced on it clear even to eyes that would rather not have read there any word, likely in the future to affect injuriously Heather’s happiness or Heather’s peace.

‘And another thing,’—it was Miss Hope again speaking, which brought Heather back from a long vague journey to the realities of life—‘I would not have that Mr Black staying here; of course, as I said before, you know your own business best, but I know how it will all end. That man and Mrs Ormson, between them, will make Arthur dissatisfied.’

'He has long been so,' remarked Heather.

'Let me finish my sentence, if you please,' proceeded Miss Hope—'will make Arthur dissatisfied and induce him to join in some senseless project, which will ruin him. Ruin him,' repeated the lady. 'You know what that means, I suppose; and when that day comes, remember, I am not going to help him. You can tell him what I say.'

'I would much rather not,' Mrs Dudley observed.

'But I beg that you will, should opportunity offer. Tell him I have sunk all my money in an annuity, and that I shall not have a sixpence to leave or give to anybody.'

'Dear Miss Hope, I trust you do not think that we—'

'I think nothing ill of *you*,' interrupted the old lady. 'And, for that matter, I do not think Arthur mercenary, either. He could have packed all those children off with their mother years ago, had he not been generous as well as foolish; but he is just the man first to get rid of all his own money, and then to think he can get rid of all mine too, so disabuse his mind of that idea, will you, like a dear sweet soul?'

'As I am confident such an idea never entered his mind, there can be no necessity for me to disabuse him of it,' said Heather, a little stiffly.

'Well, when it does enter it, do not depend on me for help. What, cross?' added Miss Hope. 'Frowning is not at all becoming to you, Heather; and I did not think your eyes could have held so dark a look as I see in them now.'

'Because everything seems to be going wrong,' Mrs Dudley said passionately; 'because one comes to me with advice, and another with a caution, till I am sick and tired of both; because no person seems to like any other person; because, for peace sake, I have even to keep my children constantly out of sight; because there are dreadful things said, and dreadful things thought; because I am miserable, and everybody tries, I do believe, to make me more miserable still.'

'Sit down,' said Miss Hope; and when Heather seemed inclined to rebel, the old lady pushed her with gentle force into the nearest

chair. 'Mrs Dudley, I am going to talk to you ;' she proceeded, but then she paused, and involuntarily, as it seemed, put another chocolate into her mouth.

'Take one?' she said, handing the box to Heather.

'Not any, thank you ;' the brown eyes looked very defiant at the moment, and Heather's tone was defiant also.

'You do not like chocolate?'

'I detest it,' was the explicit answer.

'It is an acquired taste, and you have acquired very few tastes as yet, I fancy,' said Miss Hope ; 'you have much to learn.'

'I am not bound to learn, I suppose,' was Mrs Dudley's reply.

'There is a school, my dear, in which it does not much matter whether the pupils be apt or not—willing or unwilling, they cannot help but learn. I should rather like to keep you out of that school ; it is a very absurd thing for an old woman who has no heart and no sympathy to say ; but it is true, for all that. I am very fond of you, Heather Dudley.'

'You are very kind, Miss Hope.'

'You are not in a mood to think so at this moment,' said Arthur's aunt ; 'but wait a little. I have known your husband longer than you have ; I am slightly better acquainted with the world, and the men and women in it, than you are ; and I want to tell you, that if Arthur and Mr Black are much together, my nephew will make ducks and drakes of Berrie Down, and you and he and the children won't have sixpence a-year.'

It was not a pleasant picture to contemplate. Let a woman be as little sordid as she please, still the interest on sixpence paid quarterly must seem an insufficient income ; and Heather sat silent for a minute considering Miss Hope's words. She was a wise wife, though a loyal ; and though her companion had hurt and irritated her, still she would not let the bark containing Arthur Dudley's fortune go down, if timely knowledge could prevent its doing so.

'What is the danger?' she asked at length ; 'what is the precise danger you think an intimacy with Mr Black involves?'

'His drawing Arthur into some of his schemes,' was the reply.

'You know, of course, Mr Black is a man who has always lived by his wits.'

'No, I do not,' answered Heather. 'I should have thought they would have yielded him an insufficient income.'

'On the contrary, they have yielded him a very good income,' said Miss Hope; 'and for this reason, that he cannot be put down. His impudence and, I may add, his energy, are inexhaustible. He is like a cork—he will float where much more valuable people founder. Now, if Arthur go with him, Arthur will founder.'

'How do you mean, go with him?' asked Heather.

'Join him, embark in any of his numerous speculations. Wait a moment; I have got a letter concerning our friend in my pocket. Let me turn the key in your door first, to keep out some of those irrepressible people whom I hear coming in search of you. I am not going to show you that letter, but I will read you a few paragraphs out of it. There, I told you—knock away—who's there?—what do you want?'

'May I come in?' asked Mrs Ormson, vainly trying to open the door. 'Is Heather to be seen?'

'No,' almost screamed Miss Hope; 'she is lying down with a very bad headache, and must not be disturbed.'

'May I not speak to her for a moment?'

'Certainly not; I will come down-stairs presently and hear all you have got to say.'

'That you won't,' thought Mrs Ormson.

'Now, do go away, please, Mrs Ormson, and tell your daughter not to come worrying. There, that's a good riddance; how frightened you look, child!'

'She will be so angry—so offended.'

'Let her be offended. Is the house not your own? Have you no right to ten minutes' quiet in the day? Are you to be at the beck and call of a parcel of people who would like you to slave for their amusement? I'm out of patience with it. And, besides, your head *is* aching. Don't contradict me; I know better.'

'I had no intention of contradicting you,' Heather answered. 'Now about the letter, Miss Hope—that is, if you think it quite right for me to hear it.'

In reply to which last clause, Arthur's aunt told Heather not to be absurd, but to listen attentively.

'Respecting Mr Black, I should recommend great caution. He is a person who has had almost every known iron in the fire, and burnt other men's fingers with all of them. He has made a composition with his creditors three times—(a composition means, that if you owe a person a hundred pounds, you pay him ten shillings, and the debt is done with.' This, Miss Hope.) 'Passed through the Insolvent Court thrice, and been bankrupt twice—(bankruptcies, and insolvencies, and compositions all pretty nearly come to the same thing.' Miss Hope in explanation again.) 'He has embarked in almost every trade which can be commenced without either knowledge or capital. He is suspected of having been connected with several of the shilling swindies—(that is, send twelve stamps, and by return—' enlightened Miss Hope.)

'I know about that,' said Heather, proud at last of being acquainted with some of the world's wickedness; 'for I sent the twelve stamps, and got back a reply advising me to sell baked potatoes.'

'Very probably Mr Black wrote it,' suggested Miss Hope; 'but to go on. Several of the shilling swindles, and particularly with one, which was carried on very successfully in the City, and which realized a very large sum to the persons engaged in it. I know about that,' confided Miss Hope, repeating Heather's words. 'The shares were five shillings each, and I took fifty, lost my twelve pounds ten, and think I bought my wisdom cheap. Mr Black it at present engaged in promoting and carrying through four or five different companies. For one of these, a very large undertaking, he is looking up directors, and has, I am told, got some good names—amongst others, that of Mr Allan Stewart. What makes you look so astonished, child?'

'Allan Stewart was the name of my godfather,' explained Heather. 'He had property near Layford.'

'This Mr Stewart is old, rich, and cross,' said Miss Hope.

'And our Mr Stewart was rich and cross likewise,' Heather answered; whereupon Miss Hope laid down her letter, and

wondered if the two could by any possibility be one and the same.

'Did you ever happen to hear him speak of a nephew called Douglas Aymescourt?' inquired Miss Hope.

'I never heard him speak about any one,' was Heather's reply; 'for, before I could speak myself, he and my father had some little difference in opinion, which finally swelled into such a quarrel that all visiting ceased. But who is Mr Aymescourt? I have heard of him, though not from Mr Stewart.'

'What have you heard about him?' Miss Hope asked.

'Nothing, excepting that you knew him.'

'And who told you I knew him?'

'Arthur; at least, he and Mrs Ormson were talking here one evening, and there was something said about your knowing him and his wife. Who are they?'

'Well, Mr Aymescourt is Mr Stewart's nephew, and Mrs Aymescourt is Mrs Aymescourt,' answered Miss Hope, shortly.

'But who was she?' persisted Heather.

'She was a Miss Laxton in the days when I knew anything about her,' said Miss Hope; 'a handsome girl, with a detestable temper and a fine fortune. They say she and her husband live like cat and dog; but all this has nothing to do with my friend's letter. Listen to it, please;' and Miss Hope proceeded: 'There can be no doubt but that, were this company once formed, Mr Black, and probably many others, would make a good thing of it; but the difficulty in carrying it through appears to be want of capital for advertising and various other expenses. Mr Stewart, as you are aware, is not a person likely to give away his name uselessly. I have no doubt he is to be liberally paid for allowing it to appear on the Direction.'

'Paid for his name? What is the translation of that?' inquired Heather.

'The translation of that is, Mr Stewart will be either paid in shares or money for allowing his name to appear on the Direction,' said Miss Hope, who, for a woman that had bought her experience for twelve pounds ten, seemed wonderfully at home in the intricacies of City matters; 'and if the gentleman in whom

you are interested,' proceeded Arthur's aunt, once again reading from the letter, 'be, as you seem to imply, not merely a person inexperienced in business, but also speculative, there can be no doubt Mr Black's purpose is to obtain money from him in order to float his company.'

Here Miss Hope folded up her manuscript, and looked at Heather.

'But we have no money,' said the latter, answering Miss Hope's look.

'No, but you have Berrie Down.'

'And you think Arthur would be so mad—?' began Heather.

'I am sure he will be so mad, if some one do not put a stop to these private walks and talks—these wanderings over the fields—these confidential whisperings.'

'Shall you read him that letter, Miss Hope?' ventured the poor wife, timidly.

'Do you think I am mad, too, Heather Dudley?' asked Miss Hope; 'do you think I want every word in it to be repeated to Mr Black? No; you must meet influence with influence; you must checkmate stratagem by stratagem. For Arthur's sake and for the sake of your children, you must avert this great evil which is coming upon you. This man must go, and Mrs Ormson also, and Arthur must not follow them to London. Berrie Down is not gone yet; but Berrie Down will go, if you do not exert yourself to save it.'

For a moment Heather bent her head on her hands before she replied; then, 'Berrie Down is not mine, to keep or to lose?' she said.

'No; but you can prevent Arthur losing it.'

'How?' Heather lifted her eyes, and looked straight into Miss Hope's face as she asked this question.

'How?' repeated her companion; 'why, you must talk to Arthur, find out what he is thinking of joining; and, if it be as we imagine, prevent his doing anything so utterly suicidal.'

'And you think I could prevent him?'

'If you have any influence at all over him, and I suppose no

other human being has so much, and like to exert it, I should think you might.'

'Miss Hope, I have no influence.'

Many a time afterwards, Heather marvelled how she came to utter that sentence,—utter it as calmly as though no bitterness lurked in the words. She marvelled how everything grew clear to her in a moment, as it seemed; how, for the time, she appeared to be another person looking calmly and dispassionately at her own position, and forming a conclusion concerning that position. The years came and stood before her then—the years during which she had loved and laboured in vain, in which she had spent her strength for nought, in which she had been happy and unsuspecting, in which she had never been other than vaguely conscious of a want, in which, though her life had always lacked the principal ingredient all lives require before they can be pronounced happy, she had yet believed herself so—believed that hers was a lot to be desired.

The years came and stood before her, and each had the same story to tell,—that during its course she had grown no more necessary to her husband, no nearer to his confidence, no dearer to his heart, no more appreciated by him.

At last, the question which had long been tormenting her was put in a tangible form, the enigma that had puzzled her was solved in a single sentence spoken by her own lips,—

'I have no influence.'

Miss Hope did not immediately answer. She sat looking in the sad, lovely face before her, till at last she arrived at a perfect conviction of the truth conveyed in Heather's words. In all her life before she had never met a woman who possessed no power either to lead or drive, to coax, to flatter, to delude, or to bully a husband; and, although she saw Arthur did not appreciate Heather, she had not dreamed of his wife having not the slightest influence over him.

'So that is the way of it,' she said, after a long pause.

'That is the way of it,' Heather answered, rising as she spoke.

Next moment she dropped back into her chair. 'It is nothing.

I am not going to faint,' she said, detaining Miss Hope, who was darting off for water. 'Only this talk has tried me. Don't you understand?'

Miss Hope was not much given to such demonstrations, but she knelt down on the floor beside Heather, and twined her arms round her nephew's wife.

'Lay your head on my shoulder, dear,' she whispered; and Heather drooped it wearily as she was desired.

She did not cry. She did not make any lamentation; but she sat with her head drooped, thinking out her trouble, vaguely wondering through it all, whether—when Mrs Ormson said, as she was often kind enough to do, 'Arthur ought to have married a rich wife,' and when Miss Hope, kneeling on the ground, murmured 'You are too good for Arthur; he ought to have married a virago,'—they had mutually in their minds' eyes Mrs Aymescourt, *née* Laxton.

CHAPTER IX.

A LITTLE BIOGRAPHY.

It is a curious question to consider how very frequently the same matter is being discussed at the same time by different people; to notice how a similar idea is germinated in utterly dissimilar minds, and becomes for a period the subject of animated discussion between various pairs and groups of people. There is no reason, so far as we can tell, why two men should talk on any given topic at any given time; but, supposing that two men do so converse, we may be morally certain that two other people, and many other twos besides, either have got, or immediately will get, hold of the theme also, and commence tearing it to rags straight away.

Various questions go the round of families, little communities, large masses, the bulk of the population, the inhabitants of countries, all about the same time. Different subjects seem to come in

the air like influenza, cholera, the cattle plague, without rhyme or reason ; they affect the whole of society to a greater or less extent ; and when they are exhausted, another idea, like another epidemic, takes the place of its predecessor.

There is no accounting for these things, no accounting for the fact that often, when you are thinking or talking of a friend long absent, he walks into your chambers, or stops you in the street ; no accounting for the very disagreeable fact, that if you find a creditor straying into your mind, if you begin wondering why he has given you peace for so long, the next post is almost certain to bring a little reminder from him ; no accounting for the ill-fortune which if, Jones, shall we say, take to writing a memoir of Fair Rosamond, sets all the Browns, Smiths, and Robinsons writing books about that frail beauty also.

Once upon a time, two people, unknown to each other, resident as far apart as Northumberland and Cornwall, shall we say, composed two melodies, and, behold, when a common friend heard the twain, they were identical. It is the same with works of imagination : a dozen people, writing novels in one year, are almost certain to handle identical subjects with a difference.

People cannot be original either, even in their travels. Imagine that Jones, exhausted with his literary propping-up of Fair Rosamond's reputation, says secretly to his own soul, ' I will eschew my kind, and take holiday where the heart of man never dreamed of taking holiday before, in the smallest county in England.' He thinks he has conceived a new thing, yet Smith is on the station when he gets to King's Cross, with a travelling-bag labelled ' Oakham,' also. It is a marvel the pair do not kill each other ; but, instead of that, they exchange cigars, and the newspapers, and stop at the same hotel.

It is a law of nature, we may conclude, this rotatory cropping-up of ideas, this constant evidence that nothing we do, or say, or think, is in itself perfectly new or original ; and, however unpleasant many natural laws may be, still we cannot get rid of them, nor escape from their control.

And, indeed—though we always are—why should we even be astonished at these coincidences ? When we see one primrose on a

bank, we may feel pretty certain there are other primroses not far off. They come in their season like the thoughts of men ; they dot the hedgerows, and spring amongst the woods ; they show their faces boldly by the road-side, and they hide them shyly amid the grass ; they are sold in the market-place, and the children gather them for posies ; they bloom ; they are sought after ; they are taken to grace lordly rooms ; they remain unseen ; they wither ; they pass away ; they are forgotten ; like the thoughts of the best men, they but serve their purpose and depart, to make way for fresh flowers, and for fresh thinkers ; for there is nothing new under the sun.

All of which may help to explain the fact, that although Mr Black's latest financial undertaking resembled the root of a primrose as little as any two things on the face of the earth could do by possibility, still his scheme bore many flowers of speech in Berrie Down Hollow.

One the day when Miss Hope broke ground in Heather's dressing-room, many other people broke up the same ground, though with different intentions, and in different language.

Gilbert told Bessie how Mr Black had offered him the business of a 'large company' (Mr Harcourt was a young solicitor) ; at least, said he would try to get it for him, whereupon Bessie remarked she hoped it would turn out a good company, for she thought, during the course of his life, her uncle had often got into very questionable society.

Likewise, lying on the drawing-room sofa, Mrs. Ormson discoursed to her sister about business, and supposed she would soon be riding in her carriage now, and grow too proud to find her way to Guildford Street at all !

Speaking of his new prospects to Alick, Mr Ormson, an utterly inoffensive individual, remarked, he hoped the lad 'would not let himself be led away by Mr Black, or made dissatisfied with his small salary, for, whatever some people might imagine, fortunes were not to be picked up out of the gutter ; at least, not with clean hands,' added Mr Ormson, after a pause ;—while riding side by side with Lord Kemms along Berrie Down Lane, Mr Compton Raidsford, beholding Arthur Dudley and Mr Black

walking together up and down one of the broad green meadows, shaded by a pleasant hedgerow, remarked to his companion :—

‘I hope Dudley won’t suffer that fellow to drag him into any of his rotten companies. If he do, Berrie Down Hollow will soon be in the market.’

‘In which case I shall buy it,’ said his lordship.

‘I do not think you will, excepting at something considerably beyond its value, for I have set my heart upon it too,’ observed Mr Raidsford; whereupon the pair laughed, and Lord Kemms, reverting to Mr Black, informed his companion ‘he had been asking him to allow his name to appear on the Direction.’

‘Which Direction?’ inquired Mr Raidsford. ‘He is floating, or rather trying to float, several companies. For which of them does he solicit the honour of Lord Kemms’ name?’

‘For the “Protector Bread and Flour Company,”’ answered his lordship.

‘Oh!’ exclaimed Mr Raidsford. Then, after a moment’s silence, he asked, ‘And what terms does he offer? I suppose there is no secret about the matter?’

‘None that I am aware of,’ was the reply; ‘at least, he made no mention of secrecy to me. He offered two hundred paid-up shares, and he showed me names he had got, that, I confess, made me hesitate about refusing. In fact, I meant to ask your advice. You know, every one goes in for these kind of things now-a-days, and some people must make money out of them.’

‘Yes, but not people who are associated with Mr Black,’ replied Compton Raidsford.

‘And yet he has got the name of one man who is considered unusually wary in his investments, Mr Allan Stewart.’

‘Allan Stewart,’ repeated Mr Raidsford; ‘now you do surprise me.’ And he rode on for a while, turning the matter over in his mind.

‘And he expects to get Douglas Croft.’

‘The deuce he does!’

‘So you see it is all in the family, at least in one branch of it,’ continued his lordship.

‘Ay, and if I were Lord Kemms, it might stay in one branch of it for me,’ was the quick reply.

'But still money is made out of these kind of things,' said Lord Kemms, harking back to the point from which he had started.

'And lost,' added Mr Raidsford, quietly.

'But I could not lose money.'

'No, but you might be the cause of making others lose it,' Mr Raidsford observed.

'I did not think of that,' said Lord Kemms.

'Every person should think of that before lending, giving, or selling his name,' answered Mr Raidsford, a little bitterly. 'Do you not know,' went on this man, who had made every sixpence of his money for himself honestly, 'do you not know that you, and such as you, are used by adventurers like Mr Black for decoy ducks? Could they afford to pay you the sums they do for the sake of mere ornament? No, they use you. They do not use your money, which you will not give them, nor your business capabilities, which you do not possess; nor your influence, which you would not be troubled employing in their behalf; but they use your name. When a half-column advertisement appears in the *Times*, with my Lord This, and Sir Something That, General So and So, and a few esquires, living at Parks, Courts, and the rest of it, on the Direction, the British public comes up for shares like sheep to the slaughter. It does not matter to you when the bubble bursts, but it matters to widows and orphans, to country clergymen, to governesses, to all the poor deluded creatures, in fact, who have invested money in the undertaking.'

'That is supposing the thing fail, Mr Raidsford,' remarked Lord Kemms.

'I cannot suppose anything likely to succeed, my lord, in which Mr Black acts as fogleman,' was the reply.

'Do you know much of Mr Black?'

'Yes, I have known *about* him all my life—in fact, at one time, I did business with him—for he was town-traveller for a house which supplied us with tools. He was always a clever, pushing fellow, possessed of a tongue that would have persuaded a man almost to buy old castings for steel (here Lord Kemms smiled as though he understood the meaning of the illustration), and I think he might have done well, if he could have been but content; how.

ever, he could not. His employers found out he was doing a little business for himself, and making a connection while receiving a salary from them; so they turned him adrift, and then he started on his own account. If he had been honest he might still have succeeded; but he fell into a bad habit of supplying extraordinary bad goods, while selling at ordinary prices. He had a small warehouse in Clerkenwell in those days, and certainly never was above his business, I will say that for him—am I wearying you, my lord?’

‘No, the biography is interesting.’

‘After a time, things began to go badly with him—’ proceeded Mr Raidsford; but here he suddenly paused—‘They are crossing the field so as to meet us,’ he said; ‘suppose I finish my story afterwards.’

‘No, they are not coming to meet us,’ said Lord Kemms, ‘they only turned so as to make sure of who we were—excuse me for a moment, but I want to speak to Mr Dudley;’ and his lordship shouted out a greeting to the Squire, who, standing on his dignity, only raised his hat in acknowledgment, and resumed his conversation with Mr Black.

But Lord Kemms was not a man to be so easily diverted from his purpose. Backing his horse to the other side of the road, he put him at the ditch, and next moment was cantering across the field towards his neighbour.

‘Don’t bring an action for trespass against me, Mr Dudley,’ he said, laughing; ‘you are so hard to catch, I could not resist the opportunity of speaking to you about that filly your brother was training. Do you really wish to keep her? she is exactly what I want for my niece.’

With his hands buried in his pockets, Squire Dudley stood silent, looking at the mane of Lord Kemms’ Black Knight.

Truth was, brought face to face with this would-be purchaser, he did not know exactly what answer to make.

‘If you really mean to keep her,’ proceeded Lord Kemms, growing a little hot and uncomfortable, ‘of course I can only apologize for my mistake; but the fact is, I heard you were going to sell her, and—and—being neighbours, and so forth, I thought you might as well sell her to me as to anybody else.

Still Arthur did not speak—and there is no knowing when he would have spoken to the purpose, had not Mr Black rushed in with—

‘I suppose it resolves itself into a money question, my lord—of course I know nothing about the horse or the offer, but my experience is that everything *is* a money question now-a-days.’

‘If that be the case—’ began Lord Kemms, good-humouredly—but Arthur cut across his sentence :

‘It is not so with me,’ he said, deliberately turning his back on Mr Black so as to cut him out of the conversation ; “it is not so with me. For the sake of a few pounds, I would not haggle and bargain with any man—more especially your lordship. I did intend to keep the filly—not exactly for my own riding, but because I thought, and think still, she would be worth three times over what you offered me in another twelve months ; but I have changed my mind about the matter, and, if you like to have her on the terms you offered before, I will send her over to the Park to-night. She is fit for any light weight to ride ; my brother can break a horse better than any one I know.’

Arthur spoke rapidly : there was a look in his face, and a decision about his manner, Lord Kemms had never noticed before ; but then, to be sure, his opportunities of witnessing the Squire’s moods had been few and far between.

From the Squire it was natural Lord Kemms’ glance should wander to Mr Black, and written on that gentleman’s expressive countenance, the peer read such intense disgust at Arthur’s folly, that he could scarcely refrain from laughing.

‘Thank you, Mr Dudley,’ he said, gathering up his reins and stroking the Black Knight’s neck as he spoke ; ‘thank you very much. I shall be very proud of Nellie, and think her a great addition to my stud—she is a perfect beauty !’

‘I would not sell her to you if I did not believe her to be every bit as good as she looks,’ answered the Squire.

‘Of *that* I am certain,’ was the reply ; and Lord Kemms held out his hand to Arthur,—a courtesy which he did not think it necessary to extend to Mr Black.

‘Then you will send her over this evening ?’ were his last words,

as, with a farewell nod to Mr Black, he galloped across the field to rejoin Mr Raidsford, at whose horse had been regaling itself the expense of Mr Dudley's thorn-hedge during the time occupied by the preceding conversation.

'Well, it is no wonder you are a poor man, Dudley,' remarked Mr Black, the moment Lord Kemms was out of earshot; 'he would have given you fifty guineas more for that Nellie creature, as easily as fifty pence.'

'I am not a horse-dealer,' returned the Squire, coldly. 'And have you not secured what you wanted? You said a hundred pounds would be sufficient to commence your advertising; you have got your hundred pounds, and Nellie is gone.'

'You speak as if you regretted her,' said Mr Black.

'Whether I do or not is my concern,' was the reply.

'Of course; only, if you do regret her, say the word, and I will go to Runcorn. He would take it up, pretty sharp, I can tell you; only, as I explained, those fellows always want the biggest share for themselves.'

'I have sold the mare, and there's an end of it,' answered Arthur, resuming his walk up and down the meadow.

'There's the beginning of it,' was Mr Raidsford's somewhat different comment when Lord Kemms told him the result of the interview. 'Your cheque will be passed through Mr Black's bank before the week is over. Well, I am heartily sorry for Dudley. Even from this simple transaction it is easy to see what the result will prove. A man like that stands no chance with Mr Peter Black.'

'You were telling me Mr Black's history,' suggested Lord Kemms. 'We left him in Clerkenwell, on his own account, and not above his business.'

'Your lordship must kindly excuse my City slang,' answered Mr Raidsford.

'On the contrary—excuse me—or rather let me assure you my quotations were intended as complimentary, not satirical. Your story interests me immensely. I wish I could relate a man's biography as well.'

'Although he stuck to his business,' proceeded Mr Raidsford,

without directly replying to his companion's gracious remark, 'he fell into difficulties ; perhaps, because he did not stick to it solely, but served himself precisely as he had served his employers. Speculated ; tried to attend to two things at once, and, as is usual in such cases, neither answered. Then he failed, and passed through the Court

. 'The Bankruptcy Court, do you mean ?' inquired Lord Kemms.

'No, the Insolvent,' was the reply. He has been through them both more than once. I was in with him the first time for about a couple of hundreds, and I remember the estate paid a shilling in the pound. I have never lost much by him since, however.

'After this whitewashing, he began the world again as clerk to a wine-merchant, in Devonshire Square. While he was in that employment he met with some man who had a few hundreds, and the pair went into partnership. For a time everything progressed swimmingly, but at last they failed and passed through the Bankruptcy Court, creditably enough, if I recollect rightly.

'Mr Black next turned up in an alley off Cornhill, as agent for Messrs Murphy and Hatchford's celebrated Epping ales. You might think a man who was merely an agent could not well contract business debts ; but Mr Black proved the contrary, and although Messrs Murphy and Hatchford paid, as it afterwards turned out, rent, taxes, wages, and advertising expenses, Mr Black made a thorough smash, and was whitewashed again.

'After that, things went very badly with him for a long time. Sometimes he used to do me the favour of calling at my office and borrowing small sums of money ; and, indeed, I did feel sorry for the fellow in those days, for it seemed as though luck and he had bidden good-bye for ever. He wanted me to give him a berth, but I did not think he was exactly the kind of person I required, and told him so as delicately as I could.

"If you would only take me for a month," he said ; "I could get a situation from you."

'Instead of doing that I gave him a sovereign, and heard no more of his prospects for a considerable time. Occasionally I saw him in the street, looking very seedy and ill-fed, but he never came to my place of business. During that lull I have reason to

believe he travelled for a lead-pencil manufacturer, held a situation in a tract repository, was collector to some charitable institution, started a suburban newspaper (all the original matter in which he wrote himself), and had a commission from some glass-house on all the orders he could bring in. Suddenly he fell out of my observation altogether, and for full two years I never even met him in the street. I thought he was dead, in fact, when one day, happening to call about some business at an office in Alderman's Walk, I met Mr Black on the staircase, well dressed, plump as a partridge, fluent and self-sufficient as ever. He was kind enough to stop and speak to me,' went on Mr Raidsford, with an amused smile, 'and to tell me he was doing well, remarkably well, indeed. He added, also, he was glad to hear I had got some good contracts, and assured me I possessed his best wishes for my welfare. He said he had fallen into a capital concern, and was managing partner for Hume, Holme, Draycott, and Co.

'Further, without the slightest solicitation on my part,—indeed, without the slightest desire for the information,—he confided to me the fact that he was going to be married to a daughter of Alderman Cuthbert.

'“Good City connection,” he added, with a wink, “and likelihood of money. If you are ever passing my way, come in and smoke a cigar, will you?” I never inquired which way his might be, but I said I would, and so we parted. I had a curiosity to know who Hume, Holme, Draycott, and Co. were, and accordingly I discovered that there was no Hume in the firm, and no Holme; no Draycott, and no Company, except Mr Black, who was, indeed, managing and principal partner, and everything, in the concern.

'Then I lost sight of him again; but it is a curious fact about London, at least about the City, that in it one never is able to lose sight of any person for ever. A man new to London might feel inclined to doubt this fact, but it is perfectly true, I assure you. People seem to move in circles which always bring them back to some given spot. Even the re-appearance of comets like Mr Black, that one might imagine were governed by no certain law, may safely be predicted, and accordingly I heard of him again. His name came to me in the ordinary way of trade as

acceptor of a bill that was offered to me in payment of an account, which bill I refused. Where Hume, Holme, and Draycott had vanished to I never could ascertain; but on that bill he came to me in his own proper identity.

‘Soon afterwards he failed once more. I declare when I talk of Peter Black it seems to me he must have been fifty men instead of one.

‘Before long, I discovered him managing a small house property for a man in the City, who was in the habit of purchasing on short repairing leases.

‘I will not trouble your lordship with the roguery Mr Black became acquainted with in that employment. The school was a very bad one, and Mr Black a very apt pupil.

‘“It is not what I like, you know,” he said to me, “but it is a stepping-stone,” which opinion proved to be correct, for he stepped from that into the office of a man who had made a fortune by speculating in railway shares. There he would have acquired great experience; but his principal falling into difficulties, Mr Black was adrift once more.’

‘I never heard such a history,’ remarked Lord Kemms; ‘what indomitable energy the man must have had!’

‘True,’ was the reply; ‘and yet I do not know whether the man who works hard in some one business day after day, week after week, year after year, has not a greater share of what I should call indomitable energy than Mr Black. I am not thinking of myself now,’ added Mr Raidsford, noticing his companion smile, ‘because, of course, there was plenty of variety in my life, and, though I stuck close to one trade, plenty of variety too; but I was thinking of lots of hard-working men I know who come into the City every day, and see the same people, and do the same work, and go the same rounds, and cheerfully, and by dint of very perseverance, finally conquer fortune; or, at least, earn a competence,’ which last clause came apparently as an after-thought. ‘In a life like Mr Black’s, the excitement of the game is almost recompense enough for a man. It is not legitimate work, you know; it is commercial pitch and toss; it is Cockney *rouge et noir*; it is gambling of the worst kind—gambling when the player has everything to gain and nothing to risk. It is the old

story, "heads I win, tails you lose." That is Mr Black's system of betting, at all events.'

Lord Kemms laughed. 'And yet,' he said, 'even if a man be riding a borrowed horse, we cannot help a certain admiration in seeing him take dangerous leaps. Of course, the life of a trader, who goes round and round on a business treadmill, is more useful, and decidedly more monotonous; but you cannot expect him to command our interest, however much he may deserve our respect. As for Mr Black, I own I am charmed with him. If I am not unreasonable, I should like to hear more.'

'Once again,' resumed Mr Raidsford, thus entreated, 'there is a blank in my knowledge of his history. He referred two or three people to me for his character, and for his means of paying house-rent, which I considered a liberty, but still, unwilling to injure the man, said what I could in his favour. He never came near me himself, however; and I subsequently discovered that he used one of the offices, which my representation enabled him to enter, for one of the many shilling swindles, with which, I fear, he was afterwards connected. Of course I got into trouble through my recommendation, and since that time I have dropped all acquaintance with Mr Peter Black.'

'I do not quite understand what you mean by shilling swindles,' said Lord Kemms.

'You must have seen those advertisements to "ladies of reduced incomes," to "persons in search of employment," to "persons of limited incomes," how to "secure a fortune," "for twelve postage-stamps a certain income may be secured!" To that—to common trickery—Mr Black descended, but not alone, remember, my lord. He was connected with one of the cleverest and most plausible swindles that I can remember ever having been attempted on a small scale, and his partners in it were men in your own rank of life—noblemen and gentlemen—or, at least, honourables and baronets. These highly-principled individuals were not above taking the money of foolish women and inexperienced men; they sold their names, and, when written to on the subject, said they believed the secretary to be a man of the highest standing and principle.'

‘Doubtless they were but the black sheep of your order; but, when there are black sheep in that order, it behoves you, and such as you, my lord, to be careful.’

‘What was this swindle?’ asked the owner of Kemms Park.

‘It was one in which all the tickets sold were to draw prizes,’ was the reply; ‘in which shares were regularly issued, and prospectuses carefully drawn up and freely forwarded; in which samples of goods were sent to agents on deposit of two pounds; in which the hopes of fortune held out were so great that money poured in from the provinces like water, and would have continued to pour in but for a smashing article on the subject, which appeared in a respectable journal. That proved a death-blow to the scheme, and the reputable little lot had to close their concern, and adopt some other means of subsistence. What the others did I am unable to say: one appeared in the Bankruptcy Court, but that was some time afterwards.

‘To Mr Peter Black, however, “Limited Liability,” in which the concern I have mentioned was his first venture, appeared in the very nick of time.

‘He had tried his hand at most other trades; why not at the promotion of large companies?’

‘The shilling swindles, the wonderful City fraud, were but introductions to this mightier arena, and the first time, after years, when I met Mr Black again, was when I saw him in splendid offices in Cannon Street, sipping Madeira, and issuing his orders as though poverty and he had never been even on speaking terms. I am not easily surprised, but I confess those offices and Mr Peter Black himself astonished me.

‘There was not a thing under heaven in those days that could not be formed into a company, and accordingly Mr Black was secretary to a Limited Liability for supplying England and the world with hermetically-sealed soups made from the flesh of South American oxen.’

Here Lord Kemms laughed outright.

‘There was nothing impossible about the matter,’ said Mr Raidsford, quietly. ‘I’ll be bound, if any man liked to go in single-handed for a project of the kind to-morrow, he could com-

pass it—ay, and make money out of it too ; but what a man may do a company cannot do, and accordingly the soup never came from South America, and the bullocks Mr Black represented in his reports as slain and in the English market may, for aught I know, be still roaming over the prairies.’

‘And after that company collapsed?’ inquired his lordship.

‘Why, since that, Mr Black has been sometimes up and sometimes down—sometimes living in retirement with his banking account drawn down to two and three half-pence ; and again, giving grand dinners and living utterly regardless of expense. He is in the latter state at present—has a house in Stanley Crescent, servants in livery ; dinners from Gunter’s ; Mrs Black “receives” on Tuesdays ; Mr Black asks great people to dinner any day in the week that suits his purpose. He has three separate banking accounts—he is promoting four different companies ; he has offices in Cannon-street, Broad-street, and George-street, Westminster. He has an efficient staff of clerks—he has got, it is said, a couple of first-rate backers ; he has all his past experience to guide him safely through the quagmires of limited liability ; and, in short, if Mr Black do not now make his fortune, he never will. My own opinion is, he never will ; but that, of necessity, is merely an opinion.’

‘And suppose Squire Dudley embark with him?’ asked Lord Kemms.

‘Squire Dudley will never come back to land,’ was the significant reply ; after which the pair rode on in silence.

At Mr Raidsford’s gate they parted company.

‘I shall see you again this evening, you know,’ said my lord, waving his hand as he struck his horse’s flank and galloped off.

Mr Raidsford looked after the retreating figure of his companion for a minute before entering his own gates, then he passed into his domain and rode slowly up the avenue, thinking as he rode.

‘I wonder how he will decide?’ was the burden of his mental discourse ; ‘but I shall learn this evening.’

Now the reason he said so was, that Lord Kemms had promised to come over and dine with him *tête-à-tête*—the ladies of Mr Raidsford’s family being absent.

CHAPTER X.

MR BLACK GAINS HIS POINT.

WITHOUT in the least intending to do so, Lord Kemms had put a trump card into Mr Black's hand—the trump card, in fact, which enabled him to win his little game; and the way this undesirable result came about was as follows:

For days, Mr Black had been dangling the speculative coral and bells before Squire Dudley's eyes, amusing and interesting that grown-up child thereby. For days, the man who knew London off by heart, every turn in its dirty streets, every trick and move the dwellers in that great Babylon were up to, had been leading on towards the point he desired to reach, viz. that of enlisting Arthur in his company, of bribing him with his delusive shilling to serve the great King Mammon for ever and for aye!

To do Mr Black justice, however, he had not the slightest idea of ruining his kinsman.

That blood is thicker than water, even though the blood be only consanguineous by reason of many and far-out marriages, was a creed of the promoter's—the only one he held, so far as I know, and for this reason he would not have drawn Arthur into anything doubtful; doubtful, that is, as he understood the meaning of the word.

Decidedly not; he wanted to help himself on in the world, and, if Arthur would only aid him with money, Squire Dudley too.

In the distance, Mr Black prophetically beheld Arthur rich, happy, prosperous. He saw him, not a tiller of the ground, but a coiner of gold. If Mr Black believed implicitly in anything excepting himself, it was in the vast capabilities of the PROTECTOR BREAD AND FLOUR COMPANY, LIMITED.

It was his ship; let him but once launch the scheme and the world should see. It should plough the ocean and bring back cargoes of gold; it should place Mr Black beyond the frowns of fortune; it should make a man of Arthur Dudley; it should place him in that pecuniary harbour where the world's storms are un-

heeded, in which to the gallant vessel, riding safely at anchor, the waves of the great sea signify as little as ripples on the stream.

What Mr Black had always wanted was, according to his own statement, capital—given to him at any stage of his career (depending somewhat, however, on the stage he had reached), one hundred, five hundred, one thousand pounds, and Mr Black saw his way clear to fortune.

All his life he had been racing after this phantom, which as constantly eluded his grasp, for what seemed capital for him one day was not capital the next. Suppose, for instance, this week one hundred pounds bounded the horizon of his desires, next week he discovered two were needed to accomplish his object. Truth was, his appetite grew by what it fed on, and the meal which one day he fancied would prove a feast, he turned from the following, as unfit to satisfy even a beggar.

To have heard Mr Black discourse about a residence, for instance, concerning the accommodation he considered necessary, the worldly position he regarded as essential to happiness, the servants such an establishment required, no one would have imagined he had ever been reduced to lodgings in Hoxton, where he was served by the dirtiest of slip-shod maids, and had his beer—when he could pay for it—from ‘round the corner.’

Living in Stanley Crescent, which would once have seemed a flight too great for even his imagination to achieve, within a stone’s throw of Hyde Park, with his rooms upholstered in velvet and satin, with curtains such as the imagination of Mr Peter Black had never previously conceived could be manufactured, with carpets such as the feet of Mr Black had never before trodden upon, surrounded by mirrors and gilding, by pictures and statuettes, waited upon by silent human automatons, his wants almost anticipated, his orders obeyed to the letter, his commands remembered, his word law, the promoter’s fancy portrayed for him yet greater things to come. Even in the matter of personal gratification it would seem that there is such a thing necessary as education—the education of what to desire; and this instruction Mr Black’s youth had lacked; consequently, as the sailor’s desires were for ‘an ocean of rum,’ and then ‘as much tobacco as he could chew,’ and

then 'more rum,' so Mr Black's ignorant soul craved only for more luxury, a larger house, and a still better situation; more rooms to be upholstered in a still more magnificent style; costlier pictures, older china, softer carpets; a larger number of servants, equipages in which to drive round the Park; and money, money, money, with which to keep up the show, and maintain still grander appearances.

A change that, from the retirement of White-cross Street; from the shabby bed-room with use of sitting-room in Hoxton; from even more wretched lodgings into which he had been glad to creep at so much a night! In those weary days he envied Johnson driving the stout wife of his bosom out in the cart which, on week-days, delivered shoulders of mutton and sirloins of beef at the house of the said Johnson's customers; he grudged the good fortune of every man he saw with a decent coat on his back. He would gladly have changed places with young Tomkins, who could afford apple tart and Stilton cheese after his steak in a quiet eating-house situate in Pope's Head Alley. When a man, seated opposite to him in an omnibus, pulled out a handful of silver in order to look through it for a fourpenny or threepenny piece, Mr Black felt that individual had wronged him.

After all, it was natural enough. When the starved ragged little beggar who has stood with his nose flattened against the pastrycook's window, sees Master Tommy come forth, crammed to repletion with tarts and cheesecakes, his pockets full of sweets, and his hands of suggestive paper parcels, do you think the dirty, hungry imp likes the over-fed child, and never grudges him the contents of every one of those tempting paper bags?

And it is precisely the same with adults. The man, lacking even dry bread, cannot be supposed to gaze with unenvying idolatry at the man who has his six or eight courses for dinner; and therefore, and for all these reasons, there had been a time when Mr Black regarded the man who could pay his way with a pardonable feeling of antagonism.

But all that was changed. On Mr Johnson and his kind, on the poor creatures who were content to drone away at the business task, Mr Black looked with ill-concealed contempt.

That any man should walk while others drove in their carriages—walk without lifting a hand to better themselves—filled the promoter's mind with profound astonishment. Of necessity he knew there must be rich and poor; labourers and employers; workers and idlers; but that any person should be poor, and not cry aloud; that any human being should labour, and be satisfied; that any person should work, and accept such work as his portion thankfully, was a step beyond Mr Black's philosophy.

Not to comprehend such a state of mental obtuseness had his talents been given to him, but rather that he might raise himself to a prominent position, where it would be possible for him to stand in a public place, high above his fellows, and thank God that he was not as other men; but, rather, Peter Black, Esquire, worth hundreds and hundreds of thousands of pounds.

And very earnestly Mr Peter Black believed at last he was on the high road to fortune. If he broke down by the way, he knew it would be for want of capital—not for lack of geographical information.

Unfortunately when, in a moment of sudden inspiration, he struck out the idea of 'The Protector Bread and Flour Company!' he was up to the neck in three other companies, which were but as dross beside this mine of virgin gold.

'And it is a good thing, Dudley. By Jove, if old Stewart knew how hard I was pressed, he'd take it up himself, and cut me out of it, and make his fortune over again, the miserly old scamp! I'm in two minds to take the whole scheme to Runcorn, the advertising agent, and sell it to him—but there! I'll pull it through somehow. I'll find somebody to advance the needful, though this is the very worst time of the year for raising the wind.' Which was a perfectly true statement, it may here be remarked; though Arthur Dudley, not being a commercial man, could scarcely be expected to know how true.

'It is the best thing I ever had to do with,' went on Mr Black, 'and I have done some tidy little strokes of business in my time. Why, it is only nine months since I netted five hundred in one day, without spending a farthing, either, beyond fifty pounds deposit. There was a business for sale in the city, old established;

man's health was bad ; wife had grown genteel, perhaps ; daughters were settled ; sons in professions ; good business, but latterly neglected ; heard of it by chance—bought it, and paid a deposit. Mentioned it casually to Venny, whose fingers were itching for something of the sort. Venny went straight away to Paul, the Member of Parliament who does in those kind of affairs, you know. Paul looked over his names, and, seeing he could form a company sent Venny back to me with the cheque for five hundred pounds for my bargain. What do you think of that ? and yet, if I had only held on for another fortnight, I might have doubled the five hundred. It is better than farming, that, is not it, Squire ? You might plough up a good many acres of land before you would come on a find like that.'

'Ah ! London is the place,' sighed Arthur Dudley.

'To be sure it is, for man, woman, and child,' replied Mr Black. 'It is the place to make money, and to spend it, when you have made it. What good has a man of his life who resides continually in the country ? I often wonder, Dudley, you don't come up to town for a few months in every year.'

'Where should I get the money, Mr Black, to do so ?' questioned the younger man. 'As you justly remarked, a few minutes since, my land is not rich enough to grow five-hundred pound Bank of England notes.'

'Good that—devilish good,' chuckled Mr Black.

'It is easy for a man like you to talk,' went on Arthur, pleased with this flattering acknowledgment of his wit, 'for a man with lots of money—'

'My dear fellow, that is the very thing I stand in need of at this moment,' interrupted Mr Black.

'Well, with money's worth, then,' continued Arthur. But Mr Black cut across his sentence again.

'Not with more money's worth than you have, Squire. If I had your property, it would not be long before I began to dig nuggets out of it. If I had your stock, I would make five hundred pounds a-piece out of every head of cattle on your land. If I were a man of substance like you, I would never spend my life dragging after a lot of stupid yokels. I might keep my farm, but

it would be for pleasure, for turning myself out to grass on, so to speak, after the fatigue of a London season. Be hanged if I would go on year after year seeing money made without having a try at the cards myself.'

'It is all very well for men who have been brought up to it,' remarked Arthur.

'Brought up to it! What do you mean?' asked Mr Black. 'Do you think I was brought up to all the trades I have made money by? What do you think I started in the world with? A plain commercial education, a mother and a lame sister to keep, and twenty pounds. I never served my time; I never had the chance of learning a business, like Raidsford; I was always dragged back by having those two poor useless women to keep; and yet, still, see what I have done!'

'But you began early?' suggested Arthur.

'If I had not begun early, I should have begun late,' was the reply.

'And then I am tied to this place.'

'No, you are not,' was the reply. 'But you are like all men possessed of a small income—afraid of losing it. A man who begins with nothing has a far better chance of success than his neighbour, who starts on five or six hundred.'

'Besides, I ought to have begun long ago,' persisted Arthur.

'Better late than never,' quoted Mr Black. 'I tell you what it is now, Dudley, as long as we have got on this subject, let us talk about it. You want to make money, don't you?'

'The question is scarcely necessary,' answered Squire Dudley, with a faint smile. 'Do you chance to know any man who does not?'

'Yes,' was the ready reply. 'I know several who think themselves so deucedly safe, and comfortable, and secure, and all the rest of it, that they would not take a share in Rothschild's if it were offered to them for an old song. There is your friend Raidsford, for instance.'

'Oh! he's no friend of mine,' corrected Arthur.

'Well, he is a case in point, at any rate. Lord Kemms does not consider our new company beneath his consideration, at any

rate, and what is worth his attention ought not to be below that of a twopenny-halfpenny contractor, though that contractor may think there is nobody like Compton Raidsford, Esquire, in the world.'

'You do not mean to say there is a likelihood of Lord Kemms going into your company?' said Arthur, eagerly.

'A likelihood? there is a certainty,' was the reply. 'I have set my heart on getting him, and I will get him, no matter what it costs me to do so. But if I were to go to Compton Raidsford—'

'You will not go, though,' interrupted Squire Dudley.

'Trust me,' answered the promoter. 'I was only instancing him as one of the men who do not want to make money. He is so puffed up with his park, and his deer, and his carriages, and his riding horses, and the infernal fuss that is made about him, it would be, "No, thank you, Mr Black. I have one business, and that is enough for me. I find it as much as I can manage. Good morning!" But you are differently situated, Dudley. You, like Lord Kemms, could do with a larger balance at your banker's.'

'You amaze me about Lord Kemms,' said Arthur, thoughtfully.

'And I believe I should amaze you still more if I showed you the list of names I expect to get on the Direction. Allan Stewart will bring them up like a huntsman the hounds; but he cost me dear. Would you believe I had to give him five hundred pounds in hard cash—not bills, mind you—before he would even listen to me?'

'Dear me! I should not have supposed any man's name was worth so much,' observed the Squire.

'Worth it! he could be worth five thousand, if one only had had the money to give him, but just now I found even the five hundred a pull. You know he stands between the nobility and the commercial men. He is good to bring both, and he promises me to get his nephew.'

'You don't mean Aymescourt?'

'Yes, Aymescourt, only his name is Croft now, you know; he came into such a switching property when old Croft died. Of course I am telling you all this in strict confidence, Dudley. Not a soul knows about these things except yourself.'

'Of course,' Arthur agreed. Believing implicitly in Mr Black's statement, he felt flattered accordingly.

'By Jove,' proceeded Mr Black, invoking his favourite god, 'won't some of the City people stare when they see our prospectus in the *Times*! Won't some of them wish they had thought of such a scheme! Rather,' finished Mr Black with a chuckle, 'ra--a--ther.' And Mr Black took off his hat and wiped his forehead, and the pair had another turn on the grass under the trees in silence.

'I only wish,' began Mr Black again, 'I could begin advertising, for the great thing in all such matters is to make hay while the sun shines—a leaf out of your book, Dudley; but, till some of my other small fish are fried, I don't see my way, unless I go to Runcorn, and then he gets the flesh, and leaves the bones to me. It is that advertising! it is the devil, it is cash on the nail—money down, or else no advertisement appears; and, good gracious! think of how a few quarter-column advertisements in the *Times* run up; why, it is like printing in gold.'

Still Arthur made no comment.

'Offices, furniture, printing, even clerks, can be got on credit,' continued Mr Black, after allowing Arthur full time for the observation he did not make; 'and credit gives one time to turn round and get the shares in, but the expense of advertising has nipped many a promising scheme in the bud. Does not somebody say something about there being a tide in the affairs of men? I am not a very good hand at remembering any quotation except prices,' added Mr Black, with the laugh which had excited Lally's uncomplimentary comparison; 'but I dare say you do, and I know there is a tide in my affairs now, which would float my ship, if I could only take advantage of it. However, I'll go back to town on Monday and see what can be done.'

'How much money do you want?' asked Arthur; perhaps he was thinking, too, that a tide had come in his affairs, across which he might be able to steer his course to fortune.

'How much? Oh! I am sure I could not say,' was the reply. 'In some cases ready money goes so far, can be so well worked, that I might, perhaps, be able to do with a very little. If I went

to a capitalist, of course I should ask him for a good round sum ; but if I can find a friend, I shall only just borrow enough to keep me going from hand to mouth. In any event I must make it worth *somebody's* while to help me ; but I don't mind that, if I am only left what I consider a fair share of the profit.'

'What do you call a fair share?'

'Well, that depends. I should not mind giving any one a third who helped me through the matter. Nor even half, if the help were really serviceable ; but I should object to taking a tenth, or anything of that kind, after all the worry I have had in the affair.'

'Do you know any one who you think would go into it with you on what you consider equal terms?' was the Squire's next question.

'He's nibbling,' thought Mr Black ; so he let the line float loose for a moment, while he answered, 'Yes, I think I do ; that man I spoke of just now, Venney, would, if he is in London, but I am afraid he is off to Scotland, and won't be back for some weeks ; that is the way just at this time of the year, everybody is off, or starting off. Certainly I might go to Scotland after him.'

'I wish I had ready money,' said Arthur ; 'I should not mind risking a little on it myself.'

'Oh yes, you would,' answered Mr Black ; 'if you had been inclined for any mischief of that kind, you would not have kept your hands out of it so long.'

'How the deuce is a man to mix up in anything of the kind, if opportunity never offer?' Arthur demanded.

'But opportunity does offer ; opportunities are always lying under people's feet, only some are too proud, or too cautious, or too lazy, to stoop and pick them up. No, no, Squire, you had better stick to your farming ; you must be making a lot of money here, and your wife would not like you to go into business.'

'My wife would wish me to do whatever was best for all our interests,' said Arthur, sharply.

'Perhaps so ; but, if she would, she differs wonderfully from mine,' was the reply. 'Lord knows I have often been thankful I never cared twopence about her, or she would have kept me a go-

by-the-ground all my life. When a man is fond of his wife, naturally he does not like to cross her. I can quite understand what has kept you back, Dudley ; you ought, as Mrs Ormson says, to have married a rich wife, and then you could have afforded to humour her.'

'No man ever had a better wife than I have, Mr Black.'

'Is not that what I have just said? and naturally she influences you. I think it is a pity, you know, because women do not know what is best either for their husbands or themselves ; but it is very greatly to your credit. I dare say, if I had married differently, I should feel like you. After looking at Mrs Dudley, I think what a pity it is to see her wasting her life at Berrie Down. By Jove ! if I had a wife like her, it would be worth a thousand a year to me. Don't she set off the head of a man's table ! Wouldn't she be the one to entertain the great people I want to make useful ! And your sisters, Dudley. It's a sin to see them buried here—girls who might marry well to-morrow. Mrs Ormson and I often talk it over ; but we have agreed it is of no use fretting about the business, which is just one of those matters we were not sent into the world to right.'

In which last portion of his sentence, had Mr Black omitted the 'not,' he would much more truthfully have stated his own and Mrs Ormson's opinions. At all events, if the pair had not sufficient reliance on Providence to believe they were sent to right the matter, they thought they ought to have been, and were not slow about asserting their conviction, which comes to nearly the same thing.

'Supposing your scheme turned out well, how soon should you expect to make money by it?' inquired Arthur, apparently a little irrelevantly.

'How soon? Oh ! within a twelvemonth. I shall have my shares, of course—paid-up shares, mind you—and I shall have my profit on the sale of the mills and plant. I don't take all that trouble and risk for nothing ; and then there will be various pickings. Altogether, to begin with, I shall not clear less than ten thousand pounds, and then my shares ought to be worth twenty thousand pounds more, at least.'

‘And how much of that would you give to a person who saw you through your present difficulties?’ asked Arthur desperately.

‘If *you* saw me through, one-half,’ was the quick reply. ‘Look here, Dudley,’ went on the promoter, ‘if you are thinking of joining me, make up your mind at once, and let us talk the matter over. This is Saturday. I must do something in it on Monday. Don’t beat about the bush, man. If you want information, I will give it to you; if you wish to make a push for fortune, don’t be backward about saying so; if you fancy this venture might suit you, inquire into it fully. If you don’t like it after inquiring, why there is no harm done. I could not ask you to go into it as I might a commercial man—being a relation and so forth naturally ties my tongue—only I will say this much, it is the best thing I have ever had to do with, and there is no reason I can see why you should not make your fortune out of it too. Keep the money in the family, eh, Squire?’ and Mr Black looked sharply at Arthur from under his eyelids—looked round at him without moving his head to see how his companion was taking it.

Squire Dudley’s flood was at its tide then, he fancied; and yet he felt nervous about launching his boat upon it. He was longing to make money, hungering and thirsting for a chance of bettering his position, and yet he stood irresolute, waiting for some chance to decide his purpose, for some hand beside his own to unloose his barque, and set it floating over the waves of success to the shores of fortune.

‘How much money would be sufficient in the first instance?’ he inquired for the second time during that interview.

‘Oh! a hundred would start the advertising,’ said Mr Black; ‘that hundred would bring in some of the shares; but between you and me, Dudley, what with clerks and one devilment and another in the other companies, even a hundred pounds is a sum I could not at this instant command. I had to pay, as I tell you, five hundred cash to Stewart, and a similar sum to Crossenham. Well, you know, a few hundreds here and a few hundreds there make a hole in a man’s banking account, if he be not as rich as Miss Coutts. Then I have given a lot of bills falling due at different dates for Crossenham’s lease; and, although I think my

other ventures may give me money enough to meet those before they are presented, still I must be prepared for the worst. Altogether—but who are those riding up the lane? Raidsford and Lord Kemms, as I live! Raidsford, no doubt, trying to put my lord against the company. Ah! it is no use, my boy; you won't checkmate me so easily as all that comes to. Now, what the deuce is his lordship coming to say?' and then ensued the interview at which the reader has already been present.

'I am in with you now, Black,' said Arthur Dudley, when, their talk finished, they retraced their steps towards the house.

'Only so far as Nellie goes,' answered Mr Black, reassuringly; 'even that shall be but a loan, if you like;' but Mr Black knew better than this. He knew Arthur had, as he mentally phrased it, 'tasted blood,' and that, having done so, he would never recede from the undertaking to which he had put his hand.

CHAPTER XI.

NELLIE.

It was after dinner in Mr Compton Raidsford's house. Host and guest had finished their wine, and sat with coffee before them, silent.

Lord Kemms was thinking about Mr Black and that gentleman's proposals; Mr Compton Raidsford was thinking, not merely about Mr Black, but also about Lord Kemms, and wondering how that nobleman would decide.

If there were one thing the owner of Moorlands conceived ought to be put down with a strong hand and a stretched-out arm, that thing was bubble companies.

Even legitimate companies he disliked and distrusted.

A self-made man, he naturally regarded with suspicion the growth of any commercial system likely to render success dependent more upon capital than individual ability and exertion.

A business man, who had for his order much the same *esprit de corps* as an artist or a poet may be supposed to possess, he noted jealously the increasing tendency of the age to keep small capitalists or non-capitalists in the position of clerks and managers, to concentrate all manufactures in a few hands, and sweep modest master tradesmen off the face of the earth; to do away, in fact, with a business middle class at all, and to reduce the whole system to that of millionaire and servant.

A thoughtful man, he foresaw that if the great incentive to labour, the prospect of independence, were withdrawn, the employed classes would soon become mere eye-servants, that it would be difficult to procure thoroughly trustworthy clerks and efficient managers.

Right well he knew that the best servant is he who hopes some day to become a master, that the man who obeys orders most implicitly is he who expects at a future period to have to give orders.

High wages and large salaries might be all very well; but Mr Raidsford declared no salary which a company was justified in giving could compensate a man for the prospect of being some day on his 'own account.'

'These companies will ruin our legitimate commerce, lead to jobbery of all sorts, and utterly ruin our working men. I consider limited liability, which is, after all, only the climax of concentration of capital, the greatest curse that ever fell upon England. It is all very well to talk of the rate of discount acting as a beneficial check. The rate of discount which only winds up a few companies, simply means ruin to hundreds and thousands of small traders. In fact, in these days, I do not see how, unless a man have a large capital or be a swindler, he is to get on at all.'

Holding these cheerful views, even concerning legitimate companies, it may readily be imagined how sternly Mr Raidsford set his face against all ventures which would not, to use his own word, 'wash;' how thoroughly he detested the whole system of 'getting up' a board; with what rancour he would have pursued 'promoters,' even through the purgatory of Basinghall Street.

As for lords and honourables, for generals and colonels, for

baronets and 'swells' of all kinds, Mr Raidsford would have had them keep to their own rank and their own pursuits exclusively. That, individually and collectively, they despised business—honest work he called it—the self-made man believed, and for this belief he had perhaps sufficient grounds.

If they despised it, why did they meddle with it? Could not they keep to their end of the town, and cease troubling the City, which they scoffed at, with their presence? Not so did their forefathers. This was a good peg for Mr Raidsford to hang a host of disparaging remarks upon! The men who were first of their name, who left titles to be borne by their descendants, and money to support those titles, worked in the City, lived in it, would have thought shame to sell their honest names in order to lead honest men and women into trouble. If the aristocracy wanted some of the City gold, let them come and help coin it first.

Such and much more was the burden of Mr Raidsford's song, and it was pleasant to hear him going through that recitative with bold sonorous voice to lord or lady, to capitalist or adventurer, whenever chance offered. Pleasant to hear him, a successful man, speak thus in the home his industry and his abilities had won for him, while he was still, not young, it is true, but yet sufficiently far removed from old age to hope for many years in which to enjoy his good fortune.

His ideas might not be correct. How far they were so only another generation can tell; but they were his own earnest convictions, and he did not hesitate to express them openly.

'If I had to begin my life again now,' he said, 'I could never hope to accomplish what I have done.' And seeing what he had done, caused his opinions to carry much weight to the men and women he frequently addressed.

Success has a wonderfully convincing power of argument, and it would have been hard for any one to look at Moorlands, and not believe (knowing his history) that its owner had a right to speak with authority.

Mr Raidsford perhaps might be aware of this fact, for he was never so eloquent on the subject of private enterprise as in his own London office, which commanded a view of his extensive pre-

mises filled with busy workmen, or down in Hertfordshire, where everybody was well aware how he had earned enough to buy it all 'his-self.'

To the poorest labourer, Compton Raidsford was a standing miracle; from Lord Kemms downward every person in the community marvelled at his success.

The bran-new palace to which Arthur Dudley took such grievous exception was a matter of necessity rather than choice. If Mr Raidsford could have purchased Berrie Down Hollow, Moorlands House would never have been erected. As it was, the rich man had found it impossible, with all his wealth, to purchase an old residence in the situation he desired. As a rule, people who have desirable properties like to keep them. Once in a dozen years or so there is 'just the place' a man wants put up for sale; but so surely as this happens, that man has not the means to make it his own.

What you like in every respect is difficult to meet with, residentially as well as matrimonially, for which sufficient reason Mr Raidsford bought Moorlands without a house, and built the edifice that affronted Arthur Dudley, on it.

Before the great building (like a factory, the Squire said) was thought of, Moorlands had been a picturesque stretch of poor ground, pleasant for strolling in the summer's evenings, pleasant for picnics, pleasant to ride across, without leave asked or granted.

It was bare, meagre land, which had not been turned up for years and years, the grass of which was nibbled close down by the sheep that could scarcely get a scanty living off it. There the daisies grew in the summer-time, there the children could gather enough to make chains for a whole village, there in the low parts the rushes sprang likewise in sufficient quantities to provide butterfly cages, swords, helmets, and umbrellas for the juvenile population of North Kemms and its vicinity. There was a wood where nuts grew abundantly, a little coppice wood on the side of a sloping hill, at the base of which the Kemm flowed on its way rejoicingly. In the Kemm were silver-backed trout and tench and perch. Many a time Arthur had angled in it, and there was a pleasant old lane, wide and grassy, almost like a forest glade

bordered by fine old timber, and entered by a gate swinging on one hinge, which led away not merely to the coppice, but to a little piece of rising ground where tradition said there had once been a mansion belonging to a certain wicked Sir Giles, whose heirs were now in foreign parts, and whose bones had been mouldering for a hundred years or more in the vaults underneath North Kemms church.

Certainly the lane led straight up to the hillock, on which some remains of walls, some traces of a former building, were to be found ; but there was nothing much to confirm the idea of a mansion ever having occupied the site, though the gossips affirmed Sir Giles' had once been a great house, which was razed to the ground on account of the wickedness enacted within it. Rather hard on the house, certainly, considering Sir Giles, the perpetrator of so much wickedness, lay in consecrated ground, snugly incased in lead and oak ; but none the less likely to be true on that account, perhaps.

A few rose-trees grew in what tradition said had once been Sir Giles' pleasure garden ; and there was a goodly bush of sweet briar, to say nothing of a few evergreens and flowers, such as London pride, Canterbury bells, Solomon's seal, double daisies, and such like, scattered about in beds that had apparently been laid out in the Dutch style. But still there was no trace of winding walks, or sweeping drive, of yew hedges, courtyard, or pleasure ; nothing left to tell of a great man's residence ever having occupied the site where Mr Raidsford's palace was afterwards erected.

Lord Kemms' idea of the matter was, perhaps, more correct than the popular one. He thought it most probable Sir Giles' house had been elsewhere, and this smaller abode but a mere country cottage, in which the baronet might have drunk, and gambled, and sinned, and fought, as was averred. It was known that this same wicked Sir Giles, the last baronet, had a fine mansion in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and there was a report of his having been possessed of some broad manors in the North ; but the awful stories which were told of his wild life always had for their scene Moorlands, where there was scarcely one stone left upon another, where the daisies sprang and the rushes grew, where the nuts ripened on

the hazel bushes, and the birds built in the hedgerows and laurels, spring after spring.

This place Mr Raidsford saw, liked, purchased cheap, and spoiled—so Arthur Dudley said. Perhaps the Squire was right. No doubt the grassy lane, with its gate hanging on one hinge, with the branches of its overhanging trees almost touching any pedestrian who passed beneath them, was more picturesque than Mr Raidsford's gravelled drive and wide-sweeping entrance, than the lodges, than all the new-cut stone and fresh mortar.

Doubtless, the daisies were more lovely to the eyes than fields of corn and mangold-wurzel. Without question, the spot where the rushes and the yellow lilies grew, did not gain anything in artistic effect when drain-tiles and labourers had done their work, and the place, 'dry as a bone,' produced crops of barley better than any Squire Dudley could show. It was not to be disputed that the scattered stones, the desolate flowers, the neglected garden, the tangled little corner of wilderness, were more suggestive than Mr Raidsford's bran-new mansion; nor that the wood had been more enjoyable in its former neglected condition than it seemed when paths were made through it, and a summer-house perched above the Kemm; but still, people must **live** somewhere, and the tents they dwell in must be new at some time. Even Berrie Down Hollow had been built once; it did not come into existence with the Creation—brambles had been cleared away for it, the turf had been turned up in the fields which were now Arthur's, the picturesque common had been divided into meadows and corn-fields, into pastures and arable land.

For all of which reasons, Squire Dudley should not have complained when the lane at Moorlands was metamorphosed into a drive; when the ground which barely yielded pasturage for a few sheep, was ploughed and ploughed again, and finally laid down in grass for a deer park; when wheat sprung up where the daisies had grown; when a new house showed its face amongst the trees; when gardens were laid out, and conservatories erected, and stables built, and employment given; and a new neighbour, not such an one as the old wicked Sir Giles, who, it was stated, cared

neither for God nor devil, came to dwell at Moorlands, which he had sense enough not to re-christen.

A different man from Mr Dudley would have held out the right hand of fellowship to the stranger, walked over and called upon him, and been cordially welcomed in return ; for if Arthur were poor, he was of gentle blood, and if Mr Raidsford had risen, he was none the less, indeed perhaps all the more, friendly disposed towards one better born than himself ; but the Squire did nothing of the kind. Rather he stood on the lawn at Berrie Down and cursed his day, lamenting that Compton Raidsford—a mushroom, an upstart, a snob—should be so much, while he, Arthur Dudley, was nothing.

Had Arthur been possessed of ten thousand a year, he would never have said a word against Compton Raidsford, or the alterations at Moorlands ; he would have proffered him the hospitalities of Berrie Down, and shed the light of his countenance on the new comer ; but then, Arthur had not ten thousand a year, which made all the difference.

There are many children in the world, grown as well as little boys and girls, who, though willing enough to share a toy if it chance to belong to them, will yet refuse to play with a companion who owns the toy instead of them. They can be generous and patronizing ; but when the tables are reversed, they go into a corner and sulk.

That was precisely Arthur Dudley's case ; the world's toys were in other hands, and he would neither look at nor use them. If he could not have them of his own, he would have none of them ; if he could not have silver dishes on his own table, he would not eat out of them at another man's.

A nice, amiable trait to have to record ; and yet many a very agreeable fellow, owner of all the pleasant things Fortune reserves for her especial favourites, might not be one whit more agreeable, or contented, or genial than Arthur Dudley, if luck took a notion some fine morning of leaving him out at elbows. Only people cannot exactly comprehend this truth ; and, as a consequence, Arthur's neighbours had long been sick of his airs and tempers, as

they styled his resolution to keep himself to himself. Lord Kemms, for instance, would once have been glad enough to see him at the Park ; but Arthur rejected all that nobleman's well-intended civilities ; and thus, as the years went by, the Squire was reduced to that most uncomfortable of all positions, viz. having a mere speaking acquaintance with his neighbours, whom he could not avoid meeting occasionally, and who really came in time to feel, as Compton Raidsford said, 'out of patience with the fellow.'

And yet, looking at Berrie Down, which stood on its sunny hill, smilingly nestling amid trees and plantations with rich green pastures intervening between it and Moorlands, both Lord Kemms and Mr Raidsford were thinking pityingly of the owner, and wishing Arthur had been like anybody else.

It was impossible for them to have talked about Mr Black, and Mr Black's scheme, without bringing Squire Dudley's name into the discussion also ; indeed, Mr Raidsford had instanced him as one of the men most likely to be led into trouble on the strength of Lord Kemms' name ; 'for, although he may be too proud to visit at Kemms Park, my lord,' finished the owner of Moorlands, 'he will not be too proud to follow your lead, if he believe you are taking the road to fortune.'

After which followed a pause, a thoughtful pause, that lasted long enough to give Lord Kemms ample leisure to frame his ideas into some sort of definite shape, if they ever were to be got into shape at all. And yet when he broke silence, it was not directly of Mr Black's scheme he spoke.

'I cannot help thinking,' he said, 'about Dudley's manner when he sold that mare to me to-day. I never saw him resemble a human being so much before. The way in which he put down Black was splendid ; I could like the fellow, if he would get down off his stilts, and be a little natural.'

'There is good in him, I believe,' was Mr Raidsford's reply ; 'and as for his wife, she is charming ; I hope he won't bring her and the little ones to grief. Have you ever seen his eldest child—the girl, I mean ?'

'Yes ;—will make a pretty woman, like her mother. A strange child ; not in the least shy,' added his lordship, with a smile.

He was thinking of one day in the early summer, when he had overtaken Heather and Lally in Berrie Down Lane, and dismounting, lifted the little girl and placed her on the Black Knight's back, while he walked beside, talking to Mrs Dudley. Which proceeding had so much endeared him to Lally, that she was in the habit of talking about him as 'her friend,' and declaring he had 'lovely hair, like Lally's own;' an observation which might not have proved flattering to Lord Kemms' vanity had he heard it.

'I wish to Heaven I saw my way clear:' it was the owner of Kemms Park who uttered this by no means uncommon desire. 'What shall I do, Raidsford, toss up which it is to be, or take your advice?'

'Your lordship must use your own judgment in the matter,' was the reply.

'Now, that is what provokes me about people,' remarked Lord Kemms, pettishly. 'They say all manner of things to set one against a pet project, and then at the last moment declare a man must exercise his own judgment, as if he could do so under the circumstances. Don't you know, a man cannot judge his own case? Since you have been counsel and adviser, why should you object to decide the question? Here is the way it stands,—you say the project cannot succeed; my respectable kinsman, Allan Stewart, says it not only can, but shall. You have convinced me Mr Black is no more honest than he can afford to be, or rather, you have confirmed a suspicion I previously entertained to that effect; but then here is a good thing, about which it may pay him to be honest at last; and—and—to finish the matter, I had a fancy to go into this venture, since I have sworn never again to "make a book." I think I'll toss up, Raidsford, or draw lots; you shall hold them.'

'No, my lord, I will not; you ought not to let chance decide this question for you. It is one you ought to think out seriously, and—'

'Good heavens! I have been thinking about it for a week past,' interrupted Lord Kemms pettishly.

'Then think of it for a week more; and think at the same time betting on horses is an honest and respectable way of amusing

yourself, in comparison with selling your name to companies. In the one case you only ruin yourself, in the latter—'

'Hold, my Mentor,' once again interposed Lord Kemms, 'we have gone over all that ground before ;' and he balanced his spoon on the top of his coffee cup, and thoughtfully contemplated this feat of skill as he spoke.

'So, though you have taken the responsibility of advising, you decline that of deciding,' he went on. 'Decide, and your word shall be to me as the laws of the Medes and Persians.'

'If your lordship really wish me to do so,' began Mr Raidsford ;—but at this juncture Lord Kemms pushed back his chair from the table, and walked over towards one of the windows.

'No, no,' he said ; 'I won't ask you to do that ; it would not be fair ; besides, I am old enough to make up my own mind, and bear the consequence of mine own acts. I will not be one of Mr Black's decoy ducks, as you are kind enough to style his directors. I will write to him on Monday, and—'

'Mr Alexander Dudley wishes to speak to your lordship,' said a servant, entering the room at this juncture.

'Wishes to speak to me ?' repeated Lord Kemms ; where is he ?

'In the library, my lord ;' and forthwith 'my lord' walked across the hall into the room where Alick stood waiting for him.

The lad had not sat down. He stood beside the library table with his hat in his hand ; and even when Lord Kemms motioned him to a chair, he declined the proffered courtesy.

'My brother was to have sent you Nellie this evening, my lord,' he began. 'I have been to the Park, but finding you were here, came on. I hope you will excuse my doing so. I thought it was better for me to see you.'

'Does your brother want to be off his bargain ?' asked his lordship, sharply. 'If that be what you have to say, of course I shall not hold him to it.'

'That is not what I have to say,' answered Alick, boldly. He had felt nervous and fluttered at first, but Lord Kemms' manner braced up his courage in an instant. He had felt a discrepancy between himself, his prospects, his dress, his position, and the grand house into which he had been permitted to enter, almost

under protest (so it seemed to him), of a servant who evidently thought he had no business at Moorlands ; but that was all now forgotten.

Lord Kemms had made a great mistake, and having made it, Alick could strike him under the fifth rib. His irritation had thrown him off his guard, and now Alick could deliver his message with effect.

‘My brother sold Nellie to you, believing her to be sound. We are not quite certain that she is sound ; and, not being certain, my lord, we would not send her to you.’

For a moment Lord Kemms’ face flushed scarlet ; then he said,—

‘I beg your pardon, Mr Dudley, for my hasty speech. The fact is—I—I—had set my heart on having her ; and—really this is most provoking—I wanted her so particularly.’

‘And my brother wanted the money particularly, my lord,’ answered the lad ; ‘at least, so he said,’ added Alick, with a terrible remembrance of Arthur’s wrath when he first heard there was anything amiss with Nellie.

‘What the devil is wrong with her?’ asked Lord Kemms, irritably. ‘Sit down, can’t you, and tell me all about it.’

‘I am afraid she has got something the matter with her sight,’ was the reply. ‘When you first spoke to me on the subject, that day in the paddock, my lord,’ added the lad, ‘I thought there was not a blemish about her, but this last week I have felt uneasy. Of course it is not easy to tell whether it is so or not ; only, having been with her all her life, I notice what another person might not. I did not want to vex my brother unless I felt certain, so he knew nothing about the matter till he told me she was to be sent over to the Park.’

‘And then?’ inquired Lord Kemms.

‘Then I mentioned my fear to him, and he said you ought to be informed of it. We knew, my lord, or, at least, we thought, you would not have her examined by a veterinary surgeon, coming from us ; indeed, I doubt if any stranger could detect a thing wrong about her *now*.’

‘But you think there is?’

For a moment Alick remained silent ; he felt the hundred

pounds Arthur wanted so badly might be had, if he only appeared doubtful; and Arthur, he knew, was fuming and fretting at home over his disappointment. The youth loved his brother, and was grateful to him; further, he was afraid of his temper; but still, right was right, and honour honour.

'My lord, I know there is, though my brother does not believe it.'

'Still you might have passed her off as sound upon me, even subject to a veterinary opinion?'

'No, my lord; a jobber might, but *we* could not,' amended Alick, looking every inch a Dudley as he spoke.

'I stand corrected,' said Lord Kemms, with a laugh. 'I quite see; the thing might be possible, but not to you. Now, what does your brother propose?'

'To consider the bargain off,' was the prompt reply.

'Nothing else?' inquired his lordship.

'Or otherwise,' answered Alick, 'to let you have her, giving an undertaking that if within six months my idea prove to have been correct, he will take her back and return your money.'

'Evidently he is not of your opinion?'

'No, my lord.'

'Do you think you know more about horses than he?'

'I think I know more about Nellie.'

For a moment Lord Kemms looked hard in Alick Dudley's face, which was frank, and young, and pleasant. He had not Arthur's delicately-cut features,—he was cast altogether in a larger and a rougher mould; but he was the making of a finer man, the owner of Kemms Park decided. Looking at Alick's face, he saw reflected as in a mirror the scene which had taken place at Berrie Down, and, perhaps, it was this which made him say, suddenly,—

'Your brother was not very well pleased when you expressed your opinion to him, I suppose—blamed you, probably?'

'When people are vexed, they usually blame the person nearest them at the time,' was Alick's philosophic reply.

'You suspected nothing of this when I spoke to you in the paddock. If I had bought her then, that is, if your brother had

taken my offer then, you could have sent her to me with a clear conscience.'

'Yes, my lord. There was certainly nothing wrong with her then ; at least, nothing that I could see,' Alick answered.

'And there is nothing your brother can see the matter now?'

'Nothing.'

'Then I will take her,' said his lordship ; and Alick breathed a sigh of intense relief.

'You shall have her the first thing on Monday morning,' he said, rising, 'and the letter, too.'

'What letter?'

'My brother's undertaking to return you the money, in case she prove unsound.'

'No, I won't have it,' was the reply. 'I'll run the chance of her.'

'No, my lord, pray do not do that!' Alick entreated. 'I am as sure as I can be of anything her sight is affected. If you will take her for the six months, and pay my brother for her now, as he really wants the money, I shall be very grateful ; but I would rather repay you myself than think hereafter you had bought a useless animal from us.'

'And pray, how the deuce should you propose to repay me yourself?' inquired Lord Kemms. But the words had scarcely passed his lips before he repented having uttered them.

'I hope not to remain a burden on my brother *all* my life,' answered the lad in a low tone, with his cheeks aflame, but with eyes boldly looking his questioner in the face.

'My boy,' said the nobleman, kindly laying his hand on Alick's shoulder, 'that is three times in one interview you have rebuked me. I am sorry to have pained you, and I beg your pardon for my thoughtlessness. Tell your brother he could not have chosen a better messenger. I will take Nellie, and, when you have made your fortune, we can talk about repayment, if she turn out badly.'

'Thank you, my lord.' The boy's heart was very full, and he could not say another word.

Silently he moved towards the door, Lord Kemms following him.

‘What are you going to be?’ inquired the nobleman, as they stood together on the threshold.

‘A merchant, if I am fortunate enough ever to rise higher than a clerk.’

‘Do you think you will like business better than farming?’

‘I mean to try and like anything which offers me a chance of getting on in the world,’ was the reply.

‘Then I hope you may get on, and that I shall some day see you rich and prosperous, a millionaire. It is possible; in this house, it is scarcely needful for me to tell you, all things are, humanly speaking, possible.’ And with that Lord Kemms held out his hand, which Alick could have kissed for very gratitude.

‘I will call at Berrie Down on Monday,’ said his lordship, when Alick had passed through the open hall-door. Having announced which intention, he returned to the dining-room, where he reported the gist of the conversation to Mr Raidsford.

‘The greatest kindness you could have done Squire Dudley would have been to take him at his word,’ was Mr Raidsford’s practical comment on the affair.

‘Perhaps so; but I could not afford to be less honest and honourable than they,’ Lord Kemms answered.

‘Ay, that is the misery of it,’ said his host. ‘Honest and honourable falling among thieves!’

Some similar thought to this it had been, perhaps, which suggested to Lord Kemms the idea of calling at Berrie Down. Some vague fancy of saving Arthur—of rescuing him from the Philistines! But when once he found himself seated in Squire Dudley’s drawing-room, he felt how futile was any such hope, how utterly vain it would be for him to proffer advice or counsel caution to his neighbour.

Already the poison had begun to work; already he had dreamed his dreams, and beheld his visions; already he had made his thousands, and spent them in imagination; already the glory of the future flung a brightness across his path, and made him look on life more cheerfully, on his fellow-men more kindly.

Let success bring what it would, it could not bring more than Arthur already saw advancing towards him. Prophetically, out

of the great City he beheld riches, and honours, and glories travelling northward to Berrie Down. The dust of the approaching caravan was clear to his mental vision as the turf stretching down to the Hollow.

If for a moment he was taken aback, it was when Lord Kemms told Mr Black, in his presence, he had decided to decline his obliging offer. But Mr Black so coolly pooh-poohed what he called his lordship's hasty rejection,—so resolutely refused to take 'no' for an answer,—so determinedly, and yet pleasantly, said they 'could talk the matter over at some future time, there was no hurry about it,'—so utterly ignored the fact of Lord Kemms having assured him his mind was made up, he would have nothing whatever to do with the company,—that Arthur was reassured, and believed Mr Black, when that gentleman subsequently informed him Lord Kemms had only been a little set against the affair by 'that meddling upstart, Raidsford.'

'He'll be all right enough by the time we want him,' finished the promoter, confidently ; while his lordship was walking down the drive, feeling he had made nothing by his move, rather, on the contrary, given the advantage to a much cleverer and more ready man than himself.

'Hang the fellow !' he thought, 'and his confounded self-sufficiency. Ah ! my little friend,' he added out loud, as Lally parted the boughs of an evergreen oak, and looked out at him from among the greenery, 'won't you come and speak to me ; won't you tell me how you have been this long time ?'

Not from any shyness, but from precisely the same feeling as that which makes a kitten bound off when a hand is stretched out coaxingly towards it, Lally allowed the branches to spring back and the foliage hide her.

'Don't be rude, Lally ; go and speak to Lord Kemms when he asks you,' said a voice from behind the shrubs, while two very white hands parted the branches above Lally's head, while a very pretty face, half concealed by leaves, met the nobleman's delighted eyes.

In a moment a sweet jingle of verse seemed ringing through the air.

That pleasant and goodly thing, a woman's beauty—ever old, yet ever new—old as the world, yet new as the dawning day—chased all disagreeable thoughts out of Lord Kemms' mind while Dr Mackay's lines took their place :—

'And now and then I'll see thy face,
'Mid boughs and branches peeping.'

He had never known how beautiful a woman's face could look till he beheld Bessie's through that tracery of leaf, and twig, and stem.

More than ever now he desired to renew his acquaintance with Lally, who came forth from her hiding-place, and, in reply to his tender inquiries, informed him she was quite well,—that her mamma was quite well ; after which conversational effort, Lally—a surprised mass of muslin, hair, and freckles—stood, her lap full of flowers, looking at Lord Kemms.

'What lovely flowers !' he said.

'Bessie's !' explained Lally, nodding in the direction of the pretty face, the owner of which now, with the assistance of Lord Kemms, emerged from amid the hedge of evergreens, and stood before his lordship, laughing and blushing, a vision of loveliness worth contemplating.

'We were gathering flowers,' she said, in elucidation of Lally's statement.

'A very appropriate occupation,' remarked his lordship, gallantly.

He would have liked nothing better than ten minutes' conversation with this young lady, who had appeared so unexpectedly before him ; but Miss Ormson was not inclined to gratify this innocent desire, and made her disinclination so prettily apparent, that his lordship had no resource left but to bid Lally farewell, which he did most affectionately.

'Good-bye, dear.'

'Dood-bye !' and Lally confided to him one of her little brown hands.

'Will you give me a kiss ?'

'Iss ;' and Lally made up her mouth, and went through the ceremony with laudable readiness and composure.

'Remember, you promised to marry me. I'm to wait for you, you know.'

‘Iss.’ Lally was perfectly agreeable.

‘You will not promise so readily fifteen years hence, little one,’ he said ; but this being a step beyond Lally’s understanding, she kept silence with a wisdom which might not have belonged to her fifteen years hence, either.

And, indeed, no answer was required from her, Bessie and Lord Kemms having settled the matter with a mutual smile, after which, as the leave-taking had been already unduly prolonged, the visitor lifted his hat in adieu to Bessie, and departed.

‘Why didn’t he tiss ’oo?’ Lally inquired, quite loud enough for Lord Kemms to hear.

‘You naughty child!’ exclaimed Bessie; ‘hush! hush! hush!’ and then the pair broke their way through the evergreen hedge again, and returned, ostensibly, to their former employment of gathering flowers.

But, in reality, both Lally and her companion were looking after Lord Kemms’ retreating figure. From the grass-plot where they stood, a glimpse was to be obtained at intervals of the road, and at last Bessie relinquished her sham occupation, and stood gazing with a sad, sad look in her face, after the owner of Kemms Park.

All at once the object of so much attention turned round, and caught her in the very act.

Bessie never professed to be more than human, and accordingly she said to Lally, angrily—

‘How can you be so bold, child, as to stare after gentlemen like that?’

‘’Oo ’taring too!’ retorted Lally, indignantly; and, as she could not deny the truth of this statement, Bessie covered her confusion by a vigorous onslaught among the flowers.

After a few seconds, however, she lifted her head again, and looked along the road once more, and as she looked she sighed; but that sigh was not breathed for the nobleman whose hair was like ‘Lally’s own!’

CHAPTER XII.

LIFE AT THE HOLLOW.

ALTHOUGH, in the course of his conversation with Arthur Dudley, Mr Black had intimated his intention of running up to town on the Monday following, and probably remaining there, he did not carry that desirable project into practice, but rather announced his intention of favouring Hertfordshire with his presence for some time longer.

‘That is to say, if Mrs Dudley be not quite weary of us,’ he added ; which, of course, left Heather no resource but to entreat a prolongation of Mr and Mrs Black’s stay, which she did so kindly, that Mr Black thanked her for her invitation.

‘Just as if you had given her a chance of not inviting you,’ remarked Miss Hope, with a sneer.

‘True ; I forgot I was not speaking to Miss Hope, whose frankness is notorious,’ retorted Mr Black ; having given the lady which tit for her tat, he strolled out, in excellent temper, on to the lawn.

Spite of his dislike to the country—a dislike that was, perhaps, as genuine as anything about him (his vanity and selfishness excepted)—he liked Berrie Down Hollow. It was an establishment which, notwithstanding some blemishes, in most respects met his views.

On an income of a few hundreds a year, which had to be dragged out of the land, it is scarcely needful to say, Mr Dudley, of Berrie Down, could not ‘do things’ in the same style as Mr Black, of Stanley Crescent, who reckoned his returns loosely by thousands.

From cellar to garret, the house in Stanley Crescent proclaimed the existence either of unlimited means or unlimited credit.

From the hall to the farthest bed-chamber Berrie Down Hollow told its tale of shortness of money and of utter honesty.

No bills were run in that pleasant Hertfordshire home ; no duns ever came clamouring for payment through the gates flanked by pyracantha.

Let post-time bring what ill news it might, such ill news never arrived in the shape of an intimation that any tradesman was weary of waiting for a settlement of his 'little account;' that, if a remittance for the amount of his bill (enclosed) were not immediately forwarded, the writer would place the matter forthwith in the hands of his solicitor.

Honest and honourable, as Lord Kemms had said, were these poor incompetent Dudleys. Senselessly honest, Mr Black decided.

To live beyond their means—to owe money, the payment of which was in the least uncertain or problematical, would have seemed to them the depth of humiliation.

A horror of debt, a dread of incurring expenses which their income did not fully warrant, a proud spirit of independence, a resolute determination to spend no more than they could well afford to pay—these were the traits in his country relations which filled Mr Black with a vague amazement, with an almost contemptuous pity.

That any man—and, more especially, any woman—should hesitate about refurnishing a house, when upholsterers existed ready to send in goods on credit, was a want of courage which, though perhaps not 'unnatural,' was simply unintelligible to Mr Black. That a family should refrain from luxuries, remain quietly at home, dress plainly, and strive, by a prudent economy, to make both ends meet, seemed to him the very acme of folly.

To 'cut a dash' on nothing—to take a house with no certain prospect of ever paying rent for it—to furnish that house throughout on credit—to run bills for every article under heaven for which bills could by possibility be run—to trust to luck for meeting the Christmas accounts—to look on every tradesman as a mere speculator, who took his risk of ever receiving sixpence, to whom customers were as uncertain forms of profit as *Lim. Lia. Co.s* to Mr Black, or else as 'knowing cards,' which made the substantial householders carry them safe through the midnight flittings of a dozen less honest neighbours—these were a few of the articles to be found in the only confession of faith to which Mr Black heartily subscribed.

From his youth upward, no delicate scruples concerning

wronging his fellows had troubled the conscience of Mr Black ; and it seemed quite as strange to him to witness the remarkable honesty which obtained at Berrie Down, as it would to a pick-pocket to behold a purse found in the street restored forthwith to its rightful owner.

No doubt the theory of honesty was an excellent, a beautiful science ; but to carry that theory into every-day practice appeared to Mr Black absurd. According to his gospel, it was foolish to do without anything which could be procured for the ordering.

‘Any fool,’ he opined, ‘could buy with money ; but it required some cleverness to buy without money. If I had been one of that sort, afraid of this, and that, and t’other, I should have stayed on servant to somebody all my life. Success is just like a woman—faint heart won’t win her ; and see what I have done—just look at me.’

This was the fashion in which he addressed Alick Dudley, or any other individual on whom he hoped the sight of his exalted position might produce a beneficial effect. From the way in which he talked of his successes, it was only fair to presume his achievements had astonished no one more than himself. Perpetually he seemed trying to lay his hand on his good fortune, in order to realize it ; failing in this attempt, he desired to see his neighbour’s hand touch the glittering heap, so as to make sure it was no deception—no sham.

All his life he had been used to making believe. In the days when he lodged at Hoxton he was wont to entertain his landlady with accounts of the great people he knew, who were going to do something for him ; and shabby, out at elbows, patchy about the feet, and much dinged as regarded his head-gear, he still, meeting former acquaintances in the street, would ignore Hoxton, and ask them, the first time they were out Clapham way, to give him a call.

He had been a liar from the beginning, and even in prosperity lying forsook him not ; but like as the wicked, of whom King David makes mention, were clothed with cursing, so falsehood was to Mr Black as the garment which covered him, and as the girdle wherewith he was girded continually.

His life had been a shifting scene of unfair dealings ; of false

pretences ; of uncertain climbing ; of incessant struggle either to retain, or to regain, a desirable position ; and because his memory retained nothing but a confused recollection of excusing, inventing, distorting, misrepresenting, scheming, cheating, planning, the atmosphere at Berrie Down almost took away his breath by its rarity.

To the advantage, however, of being associated with a man like Arthur Dudley—against whose honour and integrity even slander could not make an accusation—who really had broad acres and fair lands—something tangible in the way of property—Mr Black was by no means blind.

Society, he knew, had a foolish confidence in such individuals ; and now, when, perhaps, for the first time in his life he was striving to make his fortune honestly and legitimately, he could not help feeling that the accession of such an ally gave him greater confidence even in himself.

Walking over the soft green turf at Berrie Down, he began to imagine he had done with tacking, and veering, and hoisting false colours for ever ; at last, it was going to pay him to be straightforward. If there were some things concerning the Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited, which he deemed it wiser to keep in the background, still there was no necessity for beating about the bush. There was the Company—a good scheme, a tangible scheme, with no humbug about it ; but rather, on the contrary, containing in itself almost every element necessary to insure success.

Very different was this venture to any with which he had ever previously been associated. Hitherto, he had looked for nothing beyond what he could make by merely prompting a company. He had assisted to usher dozens of ill-conditioned, unhealthy, rickety commercial infants into the world, and when he had pocketed his midwife's fee for his services there was an end of the matter. As a rule, these infants had either scarcely survived their birth, or else had grown up into disreputable swindlers ; and Mr Black, having sense enough to know this kind of practice could scarcely continue to pay him for ever, most earnestly desired to get hold of something which really had, in its own nature, some

fair chance of existence ; and working it up thoroughly, made that a stepping-stone to future successes, up which he could safely climb to the very summit of the hill of Fortune.

He was weary, not of the dishonesty of his previous career, but of its anxieties, its uncertainties, its never-ending, always beginning work. Though a strong and hearty man to look at, he felt the years spent in planning and scheming—in ‘raising the wind,’ in getting ‘paper melted,’ in running about praying for bills to be renewed, in staving off bankruptcy, in softening the hearts of obdurate creditors—had told, and were telling, on his constitution. He knew, if no one else did, how often he had climbed and fallen ; how often he had touched Fortune, and been spurned by her ; how continually luck had travelled with him to a certain point, and then suddenly taken herself off in a huff, leaving her former favourite to retrace his steps, or fight his way onward, as best he could. How he had lain through the long nights planning ; how he had thought in the darkness of ways and means ; how he had racked his brains, marvelling whence help was to be obtained ; how he had walked the City streets in rain, in snow, in frost, in the broiling summer weather, in the winter, when the cruel east winds were careering up Cheapside ; how he had got soaked to the skin, and how his clothes had dried again on him ; how he had turned into taverns, and drank brandy till he felt strong enough to go out again and face the worst,—all these miseries were fresh in Mr Black’s mind ; to all of them, he hoped, with all his heart and soul, he had said farewell for ever !

The pace at which he had been travelling, he felt, must tell at last ; over the stones, over the stones ! backward and forward, in all weathers, with all sorts of anxieties dogging his steps ; up and down hundreds of thousands of stairs ; across the thresholds of scores and scores of offices ;—how all this had wearied his mind and worn his body, he fully understood only when he stood under the trees at Berrie Down, resting idly at last.

There was no sham about Mr Black’s affection for London ; but there was equally no question that he felt a short stay in the country might do his health much good ; might clear his head, as

he expressed it, and enable him on his return to town to resume work with greater energy than ever.

‘Talk about a change to Hastings or Brighton,’ he said to Arthur Dudley, ‘why, it’s nothing to this. To walk along the shore in either place is simply walking down Regent Street, nothing else! Upon my soul, I would quite as soon take a day’s holiday in one as the other; and as for quiet, could the traffic in the city make more noise any time than that precious old sea? No; give me this solitude, this stillness, this perfect freedom, and I am content to leave watering-places to fast young women and idle men.’

And no doubt Mr Black was sincere in this statement. Though the appointments at Berrie Down were not on that scale of magnificence which Mr Black would have liked to see his kinsman affect, still the very absence of this magnificence tended to make the house a comfortable one at which to visit.

The furniture might be old-fashioned and the draperies faded; yet to Mr Black there was a certain novelty in sitting down on a chair which was undoubtedly paid for, that counterbalanced, to some extent, the effect of well-worn carpets, ancient sofas, spider-legged tables, and a square six-octave piano.

Besides, the mere fact of seeing people able to do without luxuries, able to resist the lust of the eye and the pride of life, produced a salutary though vague impression on the mind of a man who had been brought up amongst a class which believes almost exclusively in externals, and pins its faith to goods and chattels, to fine feathers, to unlimited gilding, to many servants, and big houses filled with much French polish and varnish in profusion, with silk curtains and soft carpets, and pictures in heavy, costly frames.

If Arthur Dudley could afford to live in such poor style without losing caste, then what might Arthur Dudley not achieve if he were able to live in better style? A desirable connection certainly Mr Black held that man to be, who, without any adventitious aid whatsoever, could remain a gentleman amid surroundings that ‘would settle me,’ mentally finished the promoter.

That there was something in birth, beyond a father leaving personal and freehold property to his son—that there was something also in rank over and above houses and lands—money and more money—Mr Black began to believe ; and in the pleasant summertime, amongst the green Hertfordshire fields, under the drooping trees, the promoter came gradually to understand something else, namely, that a woman who, like Heather, could manage to make herself and others happy, on an utterly inadequate income, might, mated to a different husband, have proved a treasure beyond all price.

Even Mrs Ormson, he knew, could never have shed so sweet a content over any home as Heather Dudley. ‘I believe,’ thought Mr Black, ‘she would even have made that dog-kennel in Hoxton something worth looking forward to coming home to at night. She is not clever—that is, she could never fight her way in the world, nor go out into it like many women—but she is worth a barge-load of any I ever knew, for all that. By Jove! married to a clever man, would not she have made a home for him? And then Mr Black went on to consider, in a mournful kind of way, that let him climb to what worldly height he would, domestic comfort was a thing the future could not hold for him ; that, though he might have servants and carriages, a house as fine as Lord Kemms, money at his banker’s, and an income large enough to satisfy even his most extravagant desires, he could never expect to pass through any door which might afford him admission to such a paradise as that, in and out of which Arthur Dudley passed at his own sweet pleasure, all unconscious of the blessings he enjoyed.

Never before had Mr Black remained long enough at Berrie Down to appreciate the quiet beauty of that calm home life. A hurried visit from Saturday till Monday, a scramble for trains, a hot walk to church, pressing anxieties which made the still monotony of the country almost maddening to a man whose brain was in a constant whirl of excitement ; a day or two, perhaps, occasionally, through the week—when picnics were planned and excursions undertaken—had formerly been Mr Black’s experience of Berrie Down.

Most people know how wearisome and unendurable the stillness

of night is when sleep refuses to close the tired eyelids, when either from pain of body or distress of mind, the hours are passed in restlessness instead of rest. The silence of the country, its inaction, its dead-aliveness, had been hitherto to Mr Black precisely what sleepless nights prove to many a sufferer. He could not take repose out of it; and as day, with its work and its turmoil, seems preferable to the long, drawn-out darkness, through every hour of which ascends the moaning prayer, 'Would to God it were morning!' so even the noise and tumult of town appeared to Mr Black sounds to be desired in preference to the awful and fearful quiet of that still life at Berrie Down.

But now the Hollow was to him as a calm summer's night, when refreshing sleep steals down upon the worn and the weary, giving them rest after toil, strength to rise and meet the trouble of the coming day.

The silence did not irritate him now, the utter repose of the life did not chafe his temper. He wanted to think, and he found time to do it. There was nothing pressing which required his return to town. He could let the express from Palinsbridge speed away to London, and leave him still behind at Berrie Down; he could lounge about the fields and build castles in the air at his leisure; he could stand and listen to the rustling of the wind among the trees without a thought of how time was going; he could lie on the grass, and plan his plans, and scheme his schemes, without ever a passing footfall to disturb him.

Further, he liked the liberty of the house. He could go and come, he could be alone or with the family, just as pleased him best.

There was no fuss about dress, no strict adherence to hours. If he went out for a quiet walk, dinner did not wait for him, and still he was not expected to starve the whole day, in consequence.

Mrs Dudley had no black looks for guests who lounged in late to breakfast. There was always sunshine at Berrie Down; there was always some one to give that soft answer that turneth away wrath; there was no squabbling, no jealousy, no selfishness. In that house, it was not who should retain, but who should give up. Boys and girls alike, it was the same, who could do most for each other; and, beyond all, who could do most for Heather.

Naturally a shrewd man, Mr Black could not choose but notice all these peculiarities of the household at Berrie Down ; and as he began to take a personal interest in the members composing that household, so, in the ordinary course of things, he necessarily looked deeper than he had ever done before, only to see more and more in Heather to admire.

She was his antagonist, he felt, and yet he would have given much to have had her on his side. She would be averse to leaving Berrie Down, and yet it was she, more than any other member of the family, he desired to have in town.

‘By Jove! she is a woman,’ he remarked in confidence to Mrs Ormson ; but finding his enthusiasm failed to kindle a corresponding flame in that lady’s bosom, he pursued the subject no further.

Even the very animals about Berrie Down seemed to Mr Black different to the animals he had seen elsewhere : chickens that flew on Agnes’ shoulder the moment she appeared in the poultry-yard ; dogs that relieved each other at the gate, and sat looking up and down Berrie Down Lane the whole day long, like sentries on duty ; a terrier that let Lally’s pet kitten make a pillow of him ; a cat which was turned into the pigeon-house every night to prevent the rats doing mischief, and allowed the pigeons to roost on her back without entering the slightest protest against such a proceeding ; horses that ate apples and plums in any quantity—that would search Alick’s pockets for bread, and pick the flowers out of Agnes’ belt daintily and lightly ; a goat which ruled supreme in yard and paddock, which reduced even a huge Newfoundland to a state of abject terror, which played such antics as Mr Black had never previously imagined could be gone through by an animal—which would get into the dog-kennel and keep its rightful occupant at bay—which would stand guard over the kennel and prevent Nero coming out—which would then be off chasing the smaller dogs about—butting at the colts, and causing them to rear and paw, and then scamper off round the fields, followed full flight by Jinny, who was fleeter of foot than any of them. She was a disreputable goat, of low tastes ; who drank ale and ate tobacco ; who preferred sour apples to wholesome grass ; who had an objection to letting herself be milked, and who, when she became the mother

of a kid, seemed to think the creature had been sent into the world to be rolled over and butted, and hunted and teased, from morning till night.

A shocking thief was Jinny also, who would make her way into the larder and eat up bread and pies with an appreciative appetite which ought to have proved eminently gratifying to Mrs Piggott ; who might be found standing on her hind legs, sharing the horses' corn ; who was discovered one day, on the top of a little rustic summer-house, munching with infinite relish the earliest pears that grew on the sunniest wall of the garden. Every day Arthur vowed vengeance against that goat ; and yet every succeeding morrow discovered Jinny at fresh tricks, engaged in carrying out some new mischief.

Then the pigeons ! the ridiculous fantails and the consequential pouters,—the pouters so irresistibly like a parish clerk, the fantails so vain that, in walking backwards to exhibit their outspread feathers, they often fell head over heels, to the intense delight of Lally. Lovely pigeons ! that would flutter down at sound of Heather's voice, and settle on head and hand, soft balls of white, smooth feathers, waiting to be fed.

It might, according to Mr Black's idea, be a useless life ; but, for all that, it was very tranquil and very sweet, and pleasant also from sunrise to sunset—a succession of summer days without a cloud.

Further, if, in the midst of so many romantic and countrified sights and sounds, it be not prosaic to make mention of such common matters as eating and drinking, I may add that the edible arrangements at Berrie Down met with Mr Black's unqualified approval.

To a man who had been content for years and years with chops and steaks, a pennyworth, daily, of potatoes, and a like value of bread, partaken of after the manner of those modern Israelites, City people in haste, and washed down by a pint or half a pint of bitter, it may readily be believed that the orthodox dinners which he deemed it the correct thing to partake of in Stanley Crescent were rather unappreciated luxuries.

What did he care for white soups and lobster patties—for en-

trées and Italian creams? The human being who had ever thought himself lucky to sit down to a pound of thinly-sliced beef or ham which he brought in with him wrapped up in a piece of newspaper; who had purchased American cheese, and supped on that delicacy in his Hoxton retirement; who had eaten shrimps at Gravesend, and partaken of Delafield and Co.'s entire as supplied after due adulteration by the landlord of the 'Jolly Sandboys,' was not likely to contract a passion in his later years for Anglo-Gallic cookery, for réchauffés and made dishes, for disguised vegetables and non-comprehensible meats; for sour wines and fashionable sweets. On such subjects he and Miss Hope stood at opposite poles; and it was the funniest thing imaginable to hear the two wrangling over the different opinions which they held. To have heard them talk, any outsider might have supposed a new religion had been introduced, and that while the one held there was no safety out of the old faith, the other believed that to like a good-sized joint was a remnant of barbarism, a superstition only prevalent amongst the very lowest classes in the community.

For Miss Hope, likewise, Berrie Down was liberty hall; and therefore, while Mr Black breakfasted off ham and fowl, eggs, and sirloins of beef, thick slices of bread and butter, and tea in quantity, the spinster, seated opposite to him, regaled herself with claret, fruits, and what Mr Black vaguely called 'green meat'—which meant lettuces, mustard and cress, and other delicacies of the same primitive nature.

Often Mr Black openly declared his wonder that 'all the trash she eat did not kill her;' while Miss Hope was eloquent on the subject of English gluttony, and declared with more candour than politeness that she had never eaten a dinner in England fit for a civilized human being to partake of.

'Not,' she added, turning apologetically to Mrs Dudley, 'but that I consider Mrs Piggott for England an admirable cook, and if she would only allow me to give her a few hints, I think you would find a change for the better, both in your expenditure and in your table.'

Ever ready to meet the views of her husband's relations, Heather requested Miss Hope to extend to Mrs Piggott the benefit of her

experience ; only to find, however, that such benefit had been previously offered and unceremoniously declined in words following—

‘If I cooked well enough for your sister, Mr Arthur’s mamma—Miss Hope, mum—and if I please Mrs Dudley, mum, I don’t want no instructions from you, mum. No offence, I hope ; if offence, I humbly beg pardon. I’m too old to learn new tricks.’

To the truth of which last clause Miss Hope assented with such unnecessary readiness, that Mrs Piggott’s temper was excited instead of mollified ; and when the lady in the kindest manner possible subsequently suggested ‘going into the kitchen to prepare a few dishes,’ Mrs Piggott locked herself up in the store-room with a huge Bible and her spectacles, and sat there till Bessie came to say the performances were over, and the messes ready for sending to table.

‘And messes they be, miss,’ declared Mrs Piggott, after due inspection. ‘If Mr Arthur or Mrs Dudley either likes that trash, I shall be greatly astonished ; but lor, miss ! them old maids is all alike. If it’s not cats, it’s dogs ; and if it’s not dogs, it’s meddling in other folkses business, and going about from house to house carrying their nasty prying ways about with them among their luggage. Who ever heard of boiling lettuce-leaves afore, or of putting onions, and sugar, and eggs among green pease, spiling the flavour of them ? It’s not Christian, that’s what I say ; and you tell me she fried them potatoes in oil ; and that soup—why, it is thick with grease—butter, is it, miss ? I wonder how much she has used ! And a quart of cream, do you tell me ? Well, if that is ’conomical cooking, I don’t know what ’economy is. I hope master will like his dinner, that is all—I only hope he may.’

Which was about as great a fib as Mrs Piggott ever uttered ; for most devoutly did she hope the good things Miss Hope had prepared might come out untasted.

‘Poking about, indeed !—messaging in the kitchen. I wonder how she would like me to go into the drawing-room this evening, and offer to play the pianner to her ? Talk about servants knowing their places ! It would be well if ladies learnt theirs, I’m thinking. Her sister would never have dreamt of doing such a

thing ; and as for Mr Arthur's wife, she is too soft and easy ; she ought to know better than allow such goings on.'

Thus Mrs Piggott—who, after refusing to take service with the second Mrs Dudley, or in the republic which succeeded that lady's marriage to Dr Marsden—had come over to Berrie Down some twelve months after Heather's arrival there, and stated that, 'having heard a good report of Mr Arthur's wife, she had no objection to serve her, if she were in want of a cook.'

With which offer Heather closing, Mrs Piggott a week later entered the gates of Berrie Down, and virtually resumed possession of all her old authority. Amongst her goods and chattels were a Bible, a cookery book, a tea-caddy (with a key), a pair of spectacles, a work-box, and her marriage lines—all articles without which Mrs Piggott never travelled.

A staunch Protestant, Mrs Piggott read her Bible diligently on Sundays, and on what she called particular occasions—such, for instance, as the death of a relative, the news of some frightful railway accident, shipwreck, or colliery explosion, the sickness of any member of the Berrie Down household, the birth of a child, or in times of special aggravation.

But if she perused the sacred volume occasionally, she pored over her cookery book daily. From the valuable receipts it contained she had culled fragrant flowers in the shape of savoury dishes, curious puddings, wonderful sweetmeats, and a method of making puff-paste, in which even the housekeeper at Moorlands had not disdained to request instruction.

And after that, for Miss Hope to come with 'her foreign notions, her garlic, her shalots, her tarragon, her basil, her clear soups (like dish-water), her meat done to rags, her vegetables cooked till all flavour was boiled out of them ; her fruit breakfasts, her messy salads, her pinches of flavouring, her new-fangled sauces, her endless dishes, with not a good mouthful on each.'

If Mrs Piggott had not, at this trying period, found a sympathizing listener in Bessie Ormson, for want of vent her indignation must have killed her ; as it was, Bessie took the keen edge off the knife that stabbed the cook, made fun of Miss Hope and Miss Hope's stew-pans, and told poor Mrs Piggott that the result of the

French dinner had been a failure. 'We all unaccountably lost our appetites,' said the young lady, slyly; 'the dishes were capital, no doubt, but then, if one be not hungry, you know,' and then Miss Ormson looked archly at Mrs Piggott, and the pair laughed wickedly.

'I hope you have plenty of cold meat in the larder,' Bessie went on, 'for we shall all be starving by supper time;' and these words proving prophetic, Mrs Piggott's anger was appeased; and next day she unbent so far as to inform Miss Hope she would not mind watching how she made 'that there sauce,' for she thought it very good indeed.

The conqueror can always afford to be a little generous, and in this instance Bessie held that Mrs Piggott acquitted herself with considerable credit.

'Far be it from me to say the things were in their own nature detestable,' remarked Miss Ormson to her uncle; 'under the circumstances, I do not think we can tell anything about them. We don't jump to the conclusion that an air is unmusical because an utterly incompetent person attempts to play it, and clearly, Miss Hope knows as much concerning cookery as I do.'

'There may be something in that,' agreed Mr Black; 'talking about music, why don't you play and sing, like your cousins?'

'My brain never would bear the harass and the excitement of the sharps and flats,' answered Bessie, plaintively; and with that reply the promoter, who had lately taken it into his head every member of the family ought to do something well, and contribute to the success of the general social 'rising' about to take place, was fain to rest satisfied.

CHAPTER XIII.

MR BLACK WRITES HIS PROSPECTUS.

AMIDST the anxieties of making salads, the desire to convert Heather from the evils and dangers of English cookery, skirmishes with Mrs Ormson, criticisms on Bessie, and the personal enjoyment of such luxuries as ripe fruit, coffee of her own manufacture, chocolate and claret *ad libitum*, Miss Hope by no means forgot Mr Black's commercial scheme, and the efforts she felt confident he was making to induce Arthur to embark in it with him.

A woman sharp and clever enough in her generation, she was yet no match, either in sharpness or cleverness, for Mr Black. If she knew a few things about him, he 'was up,' so he phrased it. 'to two or three of her moves,' and could turn the tables on her, when she tried his temper, as is often the wise fashion of her sex, a little too much.

The very first morning she opened fire upon him, the promoter informed Arthur, he 'knew what the old lady was up to.'

This was the peculiarly diplomatic manner in which Miss Hope, finding that Heather inclined to do nothing, commenced her operations.

The time was breakfast; scene, the dining-room at Berrie Down, with all the windows open; actors, Miss Hope and Mr Black; interested spectators, the family and visitors generally.

'Pray,' began the spinster, coquetting, as she spoke, with a peach which might have been grown in Eden, it looked so fresh and tempting; 'pray, Mr Black, can you tell me of a good investment for a small sum of money?'

Across the table Mr Black looked at her, with a merry twinkle in his eyes; then he answered,—

'Yes, the Three per Cents.'

'But my friend would not be satisfied with three per cent.,' said Miss Hope.

'A mortgage, or some good freehold estate, might suit her then,' suggested Mr Black.

‘I did not say it was a lady, so far as I am aware,’ remarked Miss Hope.

‘No ; but I concluded no man would ask a lady friend to make such inquiries for him,’ explained her antagonist. ‘She might get four, or even four and a half, and still be safe enough.’

‘But what is four and a half?’ observed Miss Hope.

‘Four pounds ten shillings per cent. per annum,’ answered Mr Black, at which reply Arthur laughed.

‘You won’t make much of him, aunt,’ he said ; ‘you cannot get him to advise an unsafe investment.’

For a moment Miss Hope turned towards her nephew, evidently meditating an attack on him. Changing her mind, however, she addressed herself to Mr Black once more.

‘But there is more surely than four and a half per cent. to be had now-a-days, is there not ; in some of those great companies, for instance?’

‘All swindles, ma’am,’ declared the promoter. ‘Should not advise you, or at least your friend, to have anything to do with them. In the companies that are *bonâ fide*, all the shares are snapped up before the project is well before the public. Whenever you hear of shares going a-begging, depend upon it the whole concern is rotten.’

‘You are an authority in such matters?’ she suggested.

‘Not a better authority than Miss Hope,’ replied Mr Black, gallantly.

‘What do you mean ; do you think I know anything about investments?’ she asked.

‘I have heard that either you or some friend of yours does,’ he answered. ‘I have heard of very good ventures you have made,—of shares sold in the nick of time, and bought wisely, and at a very low figure.’

‘I assure you, Mr Black, you have been misinformed,’ said the spinster, eagerly ; ‘all my money is sunk in a life annuity.’

‘Which, no doubt, ma’am, you purchased on as favourable terms as those shares in the Great Britain and Ireland Canal Company.’

‘Then you *had* to do with that!’ exclaimed Miss Hope, setting down her claret-glass with most unladylike vehemence, and look-

ing at the promoter as though he were a culprit caught in the very act. 'I always thought that was one of your schemes ; but never felt sure of it till now.'

'It is not wise to be too sure of anything,' Mr Black answered. 'I had nothing, as it happened, to do with the Great Britain and Ireland Canal Company. If I had, perhaps you might not have lost by your shares ; but a man I know, a confoundedly clever fellow, got rid of his the day before the smash came, and it was he who told me you had got your fingers burnt. Your friend, Mr Pembroke, did not advise you with his customary caution there, Miss Hope.'

'Mr Pembroke had nothing to do with the matter,' said Miss Hope, angrily ; 'and how you happen to be so well acquainted with my private affairs is a mystery to me. I do not consider such prying gentlemanly. I do not know what may be thought of such conduct among business people, Mr Black, but in a different circle—'

'I thought it was of business we were talking,' interrupted the promoter, 'of affairs which were strictly commercial. The moment any one goes on the market, Miss Hope, either personally or by deputy, that moment he or she becomes public property. I never pretended to be a gentleman ; but I do not think I would go prying into my neighbour's secret concerns for all that, any more than you would do,' he added, significantly.

Almost involuntarily Heather's eyes sought Miss Hope's face at this statement, and under Mrs Dudley's look the spinster turned redder even than she had done at the conclusion of Mr Black's speech.

'I am perfectly incapable of impertinent or undue meddling in any person's concerns,' she said. 'Thank God, curiosity is a feeling that I was born without.'

'Then you ought to be sent to the South Kensington Museum,' remarked Mr Black.

'Don't you think, aunt, that is going a little too far?' inquired Arthur.

'Miss Hope only meant that she had no curiosity about indif-

ferent subjects,' put in Mrs Black, as usual making matters worse by trying to mend them.

'Miss Hope meant no such thing,' snapped that lady. 'I meant precisely what I said; that I have no curiosity, and that I never had any.'

'Not even to see unfinished pictures and statues in course of chiselling,' suggested Mrs Ormson.

'I do not think Miss Hope has any undue curiosity,' said Heather; 'at least, I know she has not nearly so much as I. It interests me to know the name and occupation, and worldly means, even, of Dora Scrotter's lover down at the mill. In the country one learns to be inquisitive about one's neighbours. There is so little excitement or amusement, that every piece of gossip is seized on eagerly.'

'You dear Heather, as if you were a gossip!' exclaimed Bessie.

'That is just what I say about the country,' remarked Mr Black; 'life stagnates here; you should come to London, Mrs Dudley; come and bring the girls, and we will take you about. There are lots of rooms in Stanley Crescent crying out for some one to come and occupy them. Persuade your husband to give himself a holiday whenever the crops are in; you have never paid us a visit yet, and I call it mean.'

'We should be only too delighted if you would come,' murmured Mrs Black.

'Well, all I can say is,' remarked Miss Hope, 'that if I had such a place as Berrie Down, I would never leave it.'

'Not even to go abroad?' asked Mrs Ormson.

'Not even to go abroad,' answered Miss Hope, deliberately—an assertion which took every one so much by surprise, that no person disputed its truthfulness; not even Arthur, who, feeling his aunt's words were intended as a useful moral lesson for him, longed to argue the matter out with her, and say he should go to London, or stay at Berrie Down, or take a still longer journey if it pleased him to do so, without consulting any one in the matter.

'You would like greatly to have my nephew staying in Stanley

Crescent?' Miss Hope said to Mr Black later on in the course of the same day.

'I should *greatly*,' answered the promoter, and thus war was declared between them; and from that day forth Miss Hope began unintentionally playing into her enemy's hands.

'Take care what you are about with that man, Arthur,' she entreated.

'My dear aunt, I am much obliged to you for your kindness, but I believe I can manage my own affairs,' he returned.

'Heather, you must speak to Arthur,' she then declared; 'if you do not speak, you will one day repent your weakness.'

'But I am afraid of vexing him,' Mrs Dudley objected.

'Vex, nonsense; better vex him than lose every sixpence you have in the world.'

'Do you think my speaking likely to do any good?'

'It cannot do any harm:' and thus exhorted, Heather inquired,

'Have you any intention, Arthur, of—of going into business?'

'Business,' he repeated; 'what in the world put such an idea as that into your mind?'

'You and Mr Black are always talking together.'

'And you object to our talking?'

'No; only I love Berrie Down, Arthur.'

'Which my aunt thinks I am in danger of losing; is that it, Heather? No, I won't lose Berrie Down, nor beggar you and the children. Does that content you?'

'Yes, Arthur;' and she put her arm round his neck, and kissed him; and he, in return, kissed her, grateful, perhaps, for a wife whom so little confidence satisfied, or at least silenced; and who was as grateful for a kind word, for a loving look, as many a woman for the devotion of a life.

In those days, Arthur Dudley was a much more agreeable individual than he had seemed for many a year previously.

He was gayer, brighter, kindlier. He refrained from grumbling, and ceased to recite the benefits he had conferred upon his family.

There had come a summer to his winter, and in the bright sunshine all the good plants that were formerly hidden under the snows of adversity, put forth and blossomed into flower.

For such a change, could Heather be otherwise than thankful? Did not every creature about the house—every man, woman, and child, and even the very dumb animals—feel happier and better because the head of the family, believing fortune was coming towards him, looked out over the world with different eyes, and thought there was at last good to be found in it?

The labourers worked more willingly; the very cattle seemed to thrive better; the dogs, forgivingly forgetful that their master had been wont to repulse their demonstrations of affection with an angry 'Get off, will you!' came bounding towards him over the meadows and across the yard. They were so pleased with the notice he took of them in those days, that they lost their heads and made themselves perfectly ridiculous with their rejoicings and gambolings. They rolled each other over on the grass, and barked and worried each his companion in the friendliest manner possible. When Arthur entered the room, Muff, Lally's dearly beloved and much-enduring kitten, now kept her position, instead of walking off gravely shaking her hind legs at him as she went. He had been wont to kick her also out of the way, but now he did not disdain to look when Bessie held the saucer of milk for which she had taught Muff to beg.

Even Jinny, the ill-conditioned goat, came in for her share of the universal sunshine; while as for Heather, she basked in it. Had it not been for Miss Hope's eternal warnings, she would have forgotten her anxieties; ay, even the unpromising page of her own life which had been suddenly opened for her inspection.

Arthur was happy; and she is but a poor wife to whom the sight of her husband's happiness does not bring rejoicing also! As for Lally, a new leaf in her book also was turned over. One day she came in to her mother—hot, breathless, excited—exclaiming, 'Lally's been to the mill, and Mr Scrotter gave her two—beau—ful bantams!'

'Who went with you to the mill, my pet?' asked Heather; little expecting, however, to hear Lally say in reply,—

'Pa tooked me; and pa says, when Lally's a big girl she shall have a nicer pony than Jack to ride, and that he'll go out with her. Pa says it!' and Lally stood and looked at her mother as

though expecting Heather to make an immediate memorandum of these remarkable words.

Ah ! Heaven, how the poor Squire built his castles and furnished them in that glorious summer weather ; in what a fairy edifice he lived ; through what rose-coloured glass he surveyed his future life ! How different everything looked ; how changed he felt ; how swiftly the stream of his existence flowed by ! He was galloping on to fortune, and he never thought of the chance of fall or accident by the way. He believed in his steed, and the idea of stumbling or breaking down never occurred to him. He was in for it now ; he had—as Mr Black said to himself at the conclusion of their first actual conversation on the subject—‘tasted blood ;’ and till the game was hunted down, Arthur was never likely to look back.

Besides, there was such perpetual excitement about the matter. Letters arrived, letters were answered, advertisements were drawn up, a prospectus had to be written. Post time became a longed-for hour at Berrie Down.

There was something to do, something to expect ; the monotony of that country existence was broken up. Life at the Hollow, all at once, ceased to be mere vegetation. For himself the Squire never could have made an object and a purpose ; but here, constantly at his right hand, was a man full of energy and expedients—a man who had confidence both in himself and in his project ; who, pulling away with might and main towards opulence and success, was kind enough to take Arthur Dudley as a passenger in the same boat, and amuse him, as they rowed along, with descriptions of that fair land whither they were journeying.

Many a wiser person than Arthur Dudley has been led away by much more delusive prospects of fortune than those concerning which Mr Black waxed daily more and more eloquent.

Besides, the mere fact of having anything actually to do—‘anything to get up for,’ so Mr Black put the matter—proved an agreeable variety to the Squire. ,

He was not yet old enough to prefer repose to action, to dislike change, to distrust novelties ; and there can be no question but that the brisk confidence of Mr Black’s ideas—the sharp decision

of Mr Black's manner, seemed a pleasant variety to a man who had for years and years been droning through life, wandering over the fields with his hands in his pockets, grumbling at his labourers, lamenting concerning his inferior crops, and his cattle that would not grow beef fast enough.

Other trifles also conspired to gratify him at this time ; such trifles as a man must have lived very quietly and very economically even to notice. But then it was many a long day since Arthur had lived otherwise than quietly and economically, and for that reason one or two journeys taken to town about this period with Mr Black—when the pair went about London regardless of expense, rushed from one end of town to the other in hansoms, kept cabs waiting for them without a thought of the ultimate cost ; tipped footmen, porters, watermen ; took trains from all parts of London for all suburbs and country districts that could be mentioned ; treated subordinates to wonderful luncheons, or else had them up for dinner to Stanley Crescent, and went with them afterwards to the play—made a curious impression on the mind of a man who had hitherto looked conscientiously at a sovereign before spending it ; who had almost ever since he left college travelled second-class, affected omnibuses, shunned staying in great houses on account of needful gratuities, and generally pinched himself as much as an honest gentleman, left but with a small property and many encumbrances, was likely to do.

Of course, this recital of scraping, careful, unexciting poverty must prove as wearisome and unendurable in a book as the reality does, when your neighbour (a person to be shunned) says he has to count his sixpences carefully and walk to the station for the sake of his family. The least said is soonest mended in such cases, no doubt ; and the terrible economies poor Squire Dudley had been guilty of are now reluctantly named only to render intelligible the reason why rattling about London, in company with Mr Black, seemed to him pleasant by contrast.

To be sure—and this is really the singular part of the business—what was spent came out of Arthur's pocket. Various heads of cattle speedily followed Nellie, and the money they yielded was distributed by Mr Black with no niggardly hand.

He knew the means by which to float a company ; he believed that the way to every man's heart was through the palm of his right hand.

Mesmerism, he said, was a round-about way of putting yourself *en rapport* with any one, in comparison to slipping a sovereign between his fingers.

Further, to get up other people's steam, it is necessary, first, to raise your own ; and Mr Black held, and held truly, that there is no easier way of doing this than to rush from office to office, from station to bank, from bank to private house, all at express speed.

'This is how we live,' he was wont to say to Arthur Dudley ; and, on the whole, the Squire thought such a way of living far from disagreeable.

They did not ask or want money from any one, I pray you recollect. The great ship was still on the stocks ; there had not occurred a single hitch in the business ; it was all fair-weather work, so far, at least, as Arthur could see ; all like ordering goods and writing cheques ; giving employment and paying cash ; and it never occurred to the Squire that there could be another side to the picture ; that sometimes business assumed the form of selling goods, and asking for payment. He was but a novice, and believed implicitly their ship would glide smoothly into the water ; that she would carry a good cargo ; that the profits on her freight would be enormous ; that the passengers would all have a fair voyage, and agree well by the way ; that there would be plenty, and to spare, for everybody ; and that he should never have any harder work to do than running up to town with Mr Black, and holding interviews with all sorts and conditions of men.

They saw printers and got estimates ; they ticked off the best advertising media in 'Mitchell's Newspaper Guide ;' they looked at offices in the City ; they had long and confidential discourses with auctioneers and house-agents ; they drove to Stangate and went over the mills, which were in full work, and in and out of which went and came men covered with flour, and of a generally white and dusty appearance ; they dined at Wandsworth with Mr Bailey Crossenham, and at Sydenham with Mr Robert Crossenham.

They netted their thousands and their tens of thousands easily enough, after the ladies left the room, over wine which could not have been better. Capital, the Messrs Crossenham agreed ; was all that any business needed to ensure success. They made fortunes by the aid of pen and ink. Hundreds of tons of wheat—millions upon millions of loaves ; the merest gains, the slightest margin of profit, swelled up to something almost incredible per annum. The Messrs Crossenham were in the highest spirits about the new undertaking ; but then certainly one fact concerning those worthy brothers must be borne in mind, namely, that they had been tottering on the very verge of bankruptcy when Mr Black rushed to the rescue. This, which of course remained a secret amongst the trio, accounted for much that even in those early days puzzled Arthur Dudley—as, for instance, the intense respect wherewith these apparently well-to-do men treated Mr Peter Black ; the deference they paid to his opinions ; the readiness with which they fell into all his views ; the rapidity with which they seized and acted on his suggestions. There was not that independence of manner about the brothers which Arthur considered their means and position might have warranted them in assuming ; but the conclusion that he drew from all this was that, clever as he thought Mr Black to be, people who ought to know much more about the promoter than it was possible for him to do, thought him cleverer still ; and, had anything been wanting to increase Squire Dudley's confidence in his leader, the manner in which that individual was treated by those with whom they came into actual contact, must have raised Mr Black considerably in his kinsman's esteem.

To the men amongst whom they mixed freely, the promoter, in fact, stood precisely in the same enviable position as that dog who has got a good bone does to other curs.

With a certain envious deference they followed him, hoping to get a portion of the spoil, or the reversion, perhaps, of the bone itself, should Mr Black by any accident drop it ; whilst as for Arthur, the promoter had told and hinted such falsehoods concerning his position, his wealth, his tremendous pluck, his untiring energy, his determination to make the 'Protector' a success, that

the Squire was welcomed in the City with open arms, and became all of a sudden a person of consequence.

‘Lord Kemms walks in and out of his house just as I might do in and out of yours,’ remarked Mr Black, with calm impertinence, to a man who, though worth a hundred thousand pounds, and the owner of a fine place twenty miles from town, had utterly failed in all his attempts to get grander people to dine with him than Miller, a tallow-chandler, who dropped his Hs, and then, following the universal law of compensation, picked them up, and stuck them in where they had no business to make their appearance; who was for ever inverting his personal pronouns, and vexing the soul of the rich man’s daughter with reminiscences which, though possibly faithful, were by no means pleasant to hear related in the presence of a limp young curate the lady hoped to fascinate.

It would have amazed Arthur to know that any human being held him in high esteem, because a lord was, truly or untruly, reported to be running loose about his house; and it might have annoyed him still more to know that the cool insolence of Mr Black’s words brought the man who was worth a ‘plum’ on to the direction, where certainly no politeness or entreaty on the part of the promoter could have compassed such an end.

Behind the scenes Squire Dudley was never, however, permitted to peep. He saw the play go on, and was fascinated by its variety, its excitement, its rapid dialogue, its sunshiny hopefulness. How it was really got up, he had not a suspicion. That it was all tinsel and paint, and hollowness and sham, he had not a ghost of an idea.

It made a good show, and promised fair to draw a full house. Was not that the only thing which concerned him? Mr Black was of this opinion, at any rate, and took very good care he should see none of the dirty work in course of execution. The unpleasantnesses and difficulties, present and to come, were all kept studiously out of view. The king was never beheld without crown and sceptre; if the queen ate bread and honey, it was partaken of with locked doors, and in a decorous privacy.

No fairy met Arthur’s view destitute of gauze; unadorned with spangles, rouge, and pearl powder. The back of the canvas had

no existence for him. If disagreeable letters arrived, Mr Black did not show them to his coadjutor, but stated generally these private epistles concerned his other ventures. If a man's consent was doubtful, the promoter saw him first alone. On insecure ground he knew better than to let Arthur step; and if the Squire returned to his country home, thinking the new company had hitherto not met with a check, who can feel surprised?

Whenever there was the faintest chance of a gale, his clever captain got him into the cabin, and kept him there till the storm had blown by, or the danger was over.

He saw the life and the fun of the voyage, but none of the peril; and so he went back to Berrie Down brighter and more cheerful than ever, and Heather seeing him happy could not brace up her courage for the explanation Miss Hope assured her was essential, if she would save herself and the children from beggary.

Perhaps the part of the business which Arthur enjoyed most was that of assisting to write the prospectus.

On that document, Mr Black asserted, hung the fate of the 'Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited,' and the mutual talents of Arthur Dudley and Peter Black, Esquires, were employed for one entire fortnight in writing, correcting, and revising the production which ultimately went forth to the world, like many another great and good work, anonymously.

'It may seem an easy thing to write a prospectus,' remarked Mr Black. 'The fellows that do histories, and novels, and newspaper articles, I dare say imagine there can be no trouble about drawing up an attractive advertisement; but let one of them try to do it—that is all I say. Why, a prospectus combines within itself every literary difficulty you could mention: it has to be got up to suit the tastes of all readers; it must contain something to tickle the palate of each man and woman who looks at it. Who is to check history, and say whether it is right or wrong? but any fool can check statistics. I had a hack once, who used to do some of this kind of work for me, and he said it was all very fine for Macaulay and Alison, who could write just what they liked, and were not compelled to stick to facts, which are such stubborn things there ~~is~~ sometimes no dressing them up attractively or even decently;

but he declared there was a heap of dry bones flung to us, and we have to compose out of those promising materials brilliant pictures, exciting romances, perfect blue-books full of sound statistical information. And what he said was true. Our style must be at once brief and persuasive. We must be eloquent in order to draw shareholders, and yet mindful that each word costs money. We must say nothing we are not prepared to verify. We must be as well up in grammar as in the price of shares. We must not slander our neighbour, nor unduly exalt ourselves; and yet we are bound to show that, since the beginning of time, the heart of man never imagined, and the brain of man never conceived, such a project as that which we have the honour of submitting to the consideration of the intelligent and discriminating British public.'

'You should write a pamphlet on the subject,' suggested Arthur, laughing.

'I wish I could—I wish I dare. It would be a comfort and a satisfaction to me to tell that same enlightened British public what I think of its sense. Upon my honour, Dudley, the worse your company is, the easier it is to write a prospectus about it. If you only want to float a thing, not to carry it through, why, you can say whatever you please about the matter, and the more you say the better the shares sell.'

'And why do you not put down whatever you please about the "Protector"?' asked his companion.

'Just because it is *bonâ fide*—because I must stick to facts and figures—figures that will satisfy not country simpletons, and ambitious widows, and discontented governesses, but sound commercial men. It is a serious matter, my friend, and must be wisely concocted and wisely executed. That is why I put in merely a preliminary advertisement hitherto. I knew the *grand coup* would require both time and thought. We must have a little of the moral, the philanthropic, the hygienic, the scientific, the statistical, and the profitable; and we ought to put a Latin quotation at the top: it will look classical, and complimentary to the attainments of the people to whom it is addressed. Greek might be better, or Hebrew; but I suppose you do not understand Hebrew?'

To which accusation Arthur pleading guilty, Mr Black urged upon him the immediate necessity of 'rubbing up' his Latin, and finding an appropriate heading for the prospectus.

'We shall want one to go round the stamp also,' proceeded the promoter; 'but that is not immediately required. Yes, it is, though,' he added, 'for I must mention the stamp at the end of the prospectus. Now, Dudley, look alive; if I do the composing, the compiling, and the inventing, surely I may depend on you for the Latin and correct English!'

After fourteen years, the Squire's classical education had the dust thus brushed off it, in order to furnish a plausible swindler with a couple of Latin mottoes.

For twice seven years had he kept this thing by him, that it might serve Mr Black's turn at last.

'Dudley's!' said that individual, in frank explanation to his City friends. 'Devilish neat and taking, ain't it? Bring in the parsons; they'll think the whole thing has been drawn up by some Oxford man, as the Latin was, for that matter, out of a well which has not had any water pumped from it for Heaven knows how long. If you have any suggestion to make on the subject make it, or else hereafter hold your tongues, for I am going to have the prospectus printed off to-morrow.

'Could not be better!' answered his friends in chorus; and the programme of the 'Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited,' was accordingly sent down to Harp Lane, where it was printed (on credit) by a protégé of Mr Black's, on a very superior satin paper, procured on credit likewise.

Next day after delivery proof was duly forwarded, and the day afterwards the prospectus was returned—pressed, folded, multiplied a thousand-fold—to Peter Black, Esq., at the Temporary Offices of the Company, 220, Dowgate Hill. The bundle, containing programmes of the 'Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited,' was flung down on the counter in the outer office of 220, Dowgate Hill, at five to five precisely, and, at three minutes to six, four hundred and twenty-five prospectuses were wrapped up, directed, stamped, and posted at the chief office, Lombard Street.

‘She’s off the stocks at last, thank God!’ said Mr Black to Squire Dudley, who stood beside him; ‘she’s off the stocks and afloat!’

CHAPTER XIV.

MRS PIGGOTT’S ASSISTANT.

It was late on in the autumn by this time, and most of the visitors who had come down to the Hollow in the bright summer weather were now elsewhere.

Miss Hope, having patched up a peace with her nephew, was at Copt Hall; Mrs Ormson at Torquay, with her eldest son, the state of whose health was considered unsatisfactory; Mrs Black, at Hastings; Mr Black, much in town; Mr Harcourt, in Scotland; and Bessie, at home, keeping house for her father.

There was no one left at Berrie Down, in fact, excepting Master Marsden, who remained on at the Hollow, because the state of Dr Marsden’s finances prevented the boy being sent to school; while the state of his mother’s health rendered it an act of real charity to keep the ‘noisy, ill-mannered, ill-conditioned young whelp’ (this was Arthur’s summary of him) away from that small, uncomfortable, wretchedly-managed suburban house.

Early in November Alick was to enter on his new duties; and at Christmas, by special desire of Arthur, there was to be another and larger family gathering in Berrie Down. All kinds of people were to meet all other kinds of people; and the Hollow, he said, ‘should see Christmas kept in thorough good old English style, for once.’

Already the younger Dudleys were speculating as to whether there would be an abundance of berries on the holly bushes, and Mrs Piggott was looking to the fattening of her turkeys, and meditatively calculating how many of those unfortunate birds the expected guests would, in all probability, consume.

Already she was pouring into the ears of her youthful handmaiden, Prissy Dobbin by name, tales which sounded to that unsophisticated damsel like romances, anent the number of plums she should have to stone, currants to wash and dry and pick, about the quantity of mixed peel she must cut up, and the amount of suet she would have to chop for the Christmas puddings. As for mincemeat, Mrs Piggott avowed her intention of commencing that whenever the twenty-first of November was come and past; and had the Israelites been journeying, for a second time, out of Egypt, and purposed making a halt at Berrie Down on their way, the worthy housekeeper could scarcely have 'salted down' a larger quantity of butter, nor looked more anxiously at the tenants of the poultry-yard and the contents of the nests than she did.

As for herbs—Miss Priscilla Dobbin's private opinion was, that 'the deuce was in Mrs Piggott about them.' For ever, so she told her mother, she was rubbing off those herbs into bottles, and tying them down; while, in respect of pickles, it is on record, the assistant made herself so frightfully ill with devouring those exhilarating articles of diet wholesale, that the cook assured her she should be sent home forthwith if she could not content herself for the future with cooler viands than chilies and chutnee.

'Drat them girls!' exclaimed Mrs Piggott; 'they're every one alike now—for crinolines, and vinegar, and piccalilly. I remember a young housemaid as used to come and see me when I was taking care of General Furdie's house in Gloucester Place—I believe she used to live on pickles—bought them at the oilman's, sixpenny-worth at a time, and if she came and sat with me for half an hour, she would finish the lot while she sat talking. Ah! girls ain't like what they used to be.'

'And a good job too that they bain't,' retorted Priscilla, who was certainly as unlike one of Mrs Piggott's ideal maidens as can well be conceived.

Except that she could 'get through her work,' when she chose to devote herself to it, and that she was sufficiently 'owdacious and comical' to make time pass fast in the Berrie Down kitchen, Priscilla Dobbin was not possessed, in Mrs Piggott's eyes, of a solitary virtue.

She was not 'one' the cook would ever have had about the house ; but, of course, Mrs Dudley knew best—a severely ironical expression, which meant that Mrs Dudley knew nothing whatever about the matter ; indeed, Mrs Piggott had been heard to say, that 'a baby in arms was as fit to choose a servant as her mistress.'

After all, however, Priscilla was not exactly an importation of Mrs Dudley's. A girl had been wanted, and this girl, a protégée of Bessie's, stepped at once from a wretched home to service at Berrie Down, where she worked harder, and idled more persistently, than any young person 'of her inches,' that it had ever been Mrs Piggott's misfortune previously to come into contact with.

And yet with all she was as good company, in her rank, as Bessie Ormson in a higher ; better, perhaps, for she possessed artistic, histrionic, and imitative powers, of which the young lady was utterly destitute.

Miss Dobbin had been taught at school to curtsy, or 'bob,' as she called it ; but elsewhere she had learned to dance with anybody, and to execute 'steps' which were the delight and envy of the kitchen at Berrie Down. At school she had been taught psalms and hymns and spiritual songs ; but out of hours she had acquired a stock of ballads that would have horrified the propriety of the vicar of North Kemms, Priscilla's native parish, had he been privileged to hear them. At school she was taught to read, write, cipher, and do sampler work ; out of school it had ever been her pleasure and delight to mimic the peculiarities of mistress and master, of clergyman and clergyman's wife, of the ladies who visited the school, and of her fellow-companions, playmates, father, mother, and society generally.

She was but a young thing when she came to the Hollow, sixteen or thereabouts, with a scanty supply of clothes, a crinoline which was at once the plague and delight of her life, a net to contain her hair, and induce people to believe it was long like a grown-up woman's, and a stock of impudence that was, were Mrs Piggott's testimony on the subject reliable, 'more than enough.'

With Priscilla it was not, however, perhaps, that she had so much impudence as that she had so little reverence ; and for this reason, spite of Mrs Piggott's high social position, her imposing

cap, her stately manner, and her reminiscences of the good old times, the young girl treated her with as little ceremony as she might one of her playmates, and 'answered the housekeeper back,'—an indignity which had never previously been inflicted on that individual by any one, gentle or simple.

'She had always lived with people above and below, as knew their places and kept to them, till "you came,"' she stated to Miss Dobbin; whereupon Miss Dobbin inquired—

'O Lor', there, ain't you glad I am come, that you may see some new life?'

Did Mrs Piggott threaten to report Prissy to Mrs Dudley, that young person entreated of her to make haste and do so, 'before her shoes wore out.' Did the housekeeper, talking at Priscilla, endeavour to point a moral and adorn a tale by stating what was done in her young days—and what her first mistress, the lady of Mr Serjeant Hickley, counsellor to the King (so Mrs Piggott understood K.C.), said when she saw a servant with a bow or a bonnet, let alone a flower, added Mrs Piggott parenthetically—Priscilla, rich in ribbons, flowers, and laces, flung to her from Miss Ormson's stores, thanked her stars 'she had not lived in them days, and thought it was quite time the good old times were gone and past, if anybody was to have any comfort of their lives.'

'I'm sure I'm glad I warn't born then, Mrs Piggott; for one thing I'd be as old as you, and have nothing before me; I'd have lived it all, and not have a thing to look forward to.'

'Better have nothing to look forward to than some things to look back upon,' answered Mrs Piggott, sententiously; which immediately elicited from Miss Dobbin the inquiry whether she had got that out of her own head or somebody else's, and if there were some things she did not care to look back upon.

Clearly, the housekeeper said, the girl would come to no good, and yet in her heart Mrs Piggott liked this feminine ne'er-do-weel, and would have felt the house lonely without her.

On the whole, she preferred Prissy's chatter to the more staid and sensible discourse of Jane, the housemaid, or Sarah, her assistant in dairy and kitchen. Though torture could not have wrung such a confession from her, Mrs Piggott dearly loved gossip;

and, if she had searched the home counties through, she could not have discovered a more industrious collector and retailer of news than Priscilla Dobbin.

From the colour of the moire antique the vicar's wife wore when she went to dine at Moorlands, to the name of Miss Amy Raidsford's 'intended,' Priscilla had every atom of parish information at her fingers' ends. Why the lady's-maid was dismissed from Moorlands—what Lord Kemms said when he found his gardener sending all the best fruit to Covent Garden, and only retaining windfalls for dessert at the Park—Prissy knew as well as though she had been present.

Nor was it only from the neighbourhood of North Kemms that Miss Dobbin collected materials for conversation. She knew all about the low marriage Mr Harry Camperdon, the Fifield rector's son, had contracted with the sexton's daughter from Palinsbridge.

'And I wouldn't ha' married her if she had been hung with diamonds—should always ha' felt or thought she had been dug up out of the graves. Seen her?—to be sure I have, Mrs Piggott—as thin as a hurdle, and as pale and sickly-looking as a bit of your underdone crust. She's a contrast to Mrs Raidsford. You don't mean to say you have never had a sight of Mrs Raidsford! then you have a treat to come; like the side of a house, and mean! would look after the candles' ends, if her husband let her, and grudges throwing away her nail-parings. There is not a servant in the house dare give a glass of beer unbeknown, and they all say a nicer gentleman nobody need wish to serve. It is thought Lord Kemms would make up to one of the daughters, if it wasn't for her; but he can't abide her. Well, if I was Lord Kemms, I know who I'd have—money or no money.'

And so on, *ad libitum*, the whole day long. Making beds, cleaning plate, shelling peas, stirring preserves, Priscilla Dobbin's tongue never ceased; and let the burden of her song be what it would, the refrain never varied, and that refrain was to the effect, that, since time began, there never had been before, and never would be again, such a young lady as Bessie Ormson. Bessie had made her acquaintance at a period of (to Miss Dobbin) infinite trouble. Having been despatched to the mill to purchase some

flour, she contrived by the way to lose the money intrusted to her. Feeling it useless to proceed, and being afraid to return home, she did the only thing which seems natural to boys and girls under such circumstances, namely, lifted up her voice and wept.

While she sat on the stile leading away towards North Kemms, with her bonnet tilted over her face, her knuckles in her eyes, and making a display of feet encased in strong leather boots, and a pair of sturdy legs, which only the extremest distress could excuse being exhibited to public view, Bessie, coming along the field-path, paused to inquire into the cause of such despair.

A greater contrast than that presented by the pair could scarcely have been imagined. Hot and weary with running about searching after the lost money, sick and tired with crying, and the fear of the 'hiding,' which she explained to Bessie was sure to follow on confession; her cheeks wet with tears, and her face generally smeared by reason of having been rubbed over with her dirty hands, Priscilla's personal appearance alone entitled her to the profoundest commiseration.

Attired, on the other hand, in the coolest of muslin dresses, with the most coquettish of hats for head-gear, with a lace shawl thrown carelessly round her, holding a parasol edged with deep fringe, a little on one side, more apparently to protect the trimming of her hat than her bright, fresh, beautiful face from the rays of the sun, Bessie, leaning against the stile, held converse with Miss Dobbin concerning the loss she had experienced.

'It was a whole harf-a-crown, Miss,' said the girl, amid a perfect gust of sobs, 'and I put it in my pocket, and I never left the path the whole way, except to pull a branch of roses (the poor things were lying withered and miserable, sodden and faded in her lap), and I suppose it was when I reached up to get them the money jumped out; but I have looked and looked, and I can't see it. No, no more nor if it had had legs and run away. See, it was over in the corner of that far field. I'll show you, if you like,' she added, with a faint hope, perhaps, that Bessie might be able to find where she had searched in vain.

'The scene of such a catastrophe has not the slightest interest for me, answered Bessie. 'I will take your word that the half-

crown is lost, and I will give you another in its place, or at least two shillings and sixpence, which comes to much the same thing. You go, or have gone, to school, I suppose?’

‘Yes, Miss.’

‘Then you know what a moral means?’

‘I think so, Miss.’

‘Well, the moral of this afternoon’s work is: For the future, when your mother sends you out for flour, don’t stop to gather roses by the way, for it is extremely unlikely that you will a second time meet any one in these fields worth half-a-crown.’

Having finished which speech, Bessie, toying with her dainty parasol, still stood looking at the girl, for whom she felt that compassion, which always moved her when she saw anything of the feminine gender unkempt, forlorn, untidy, unhopeful, uglier than she had ‘a right to be.’

To her, an ill-dressed girl or woman was precisely what a daub is to an artist, a series of discords to a musician. She loved prettiness. Let a woman’s dress be of cotton or of velvet, she still loved to see that dress worn with a certain consciousness; and the terrible want of self-assertion, the utter abandonment of all self-appreciation, in the girl who now stood opposite to her, was so distressing to Bessie, that she entreated of her as a parting favour to wash her face and push her hair out of her eyes before she proceeded to the mill.

‘There is plenty of water in the stream,’ Bessie added; ‘and do make use of it freely, for at present you look as if you had been buried without a coffin.’

A week after, the young lady, who had forgotten all about this occurrence, was told that a girl wanted to speak to her—a girl from North Kemms—Priscilla Dobbin by name.

‘She does not want another half-crown, I hope,’ laughed Bessie, when she heard the name; and she went out into the hall, looking, as she always did, pretty enough to drive any man to distraction.

‘Well, Priscilla, you have not lost your money again, have you?’ thus Bessie commenced the conversation.

‘No, Miss—I found it. I could not rest; and so, the first afternoon mother could spare me, I had a good look, and I took

one of my little brothers, and he got in among a lot of weeds growing in the ditch ; and here it is back again, please, Miss—and—my duty to you,' finished Prissy, who evidently considered the last four words an appropriate ending to her sentence.

Bessie took the half-crown, and held it in the palm of her hand for a moment, doubtfully.

The coin had evidently been washed, as had also Miss Dobbin's face, which was painfully red and shiny. Then she looked at the thick clump boots, laced up with a leathern thong—at the sturdy legs, showing below the short, scanty, hailstorm-pattern cotton gown—at the little old-fashioned black pelerine—at the coarse school bonnet—at the light brown hair, cut so short all round—at the greenish-grey eyes, sparkling with pleasure—at the unmanageable mouth, which would smile and break into grins of delight at the recovery of so great a treasure—at the hard hands, that seemed to have done so much work—before she said—

'Sit down for a moment, I shall be back presently.' She wanted to tell the story to Heather, and ask her advice ; but, as Heather happened to be out of the way, Bessie returned to the hall discomfited.

She did not like to give the girl back the money, or its equivalent, and she was racking her brains what to offer, when Lally appeared on the scene of action, with a huge wedge of cake in her hand, which is only right to state she was absolutely unable to eat.

'Lally, come here,' exclaimed Bessie. 'I wish to give this little girl something by which to remember me—something to remind her of having been very careless and very good. What do you think she would like best ?' and Bessie took the child in her arms and waited, hoping, perhaps, the stranger might suggest some desirable memento for herself.

But Prissy never spoke, nor, for some time, did Lally, who first stared at Priscilla from head to foot, and then gravely turned and looked at Bessie, wondering apparently whether that young lady could conveniently part with her face as an appropriate offering to the stranger. Then her eyes wandered to Bessie's throat, and so fell on a tiny brooch which fastened her collar. The moment they did so—

‘Dive her ‘at,’ said Lally, unhesitatingly, a suggestion which she would have made all the same had the trinket been worth a hundred guineas ; as it was, Bessie abode by her decision, and taking out the brooch, handed it to Priscilla, remarking at the same time that, ‘although she might not care for it then, she would perhaps when she grew up to be a woman.’

Not to be outdone in generosity, Lally at once presented the girl with her piece of cake, assuring her it was ‘very dood,’ the truth of which statement Bessie doubted exceedingly.

Next day, over came Mrs Dobbin to know whether it was ‘correct as a young lady at Berrie Down had given her gal a golden brooch ? She did not think her gal would tell a lie, but still young uns wanted to be looked arter.’

Assured of the rectitude of the transaction, Mrs Dobbin, after having been refreshed with ale and a slice of bread and meat, was permitted to depart. ‘Altogether, the half-crown threatens to prove a costly matter,’ Bessie remarked ; but Heather only said they seemed to be very honest, worthy people, and the subject dropped.

But when, a little later on in the summer, Mrs Dudley perceived it would be necessary to procure some young person to assist in the housework, Bessie proposed that a trial should be given to Priscilla ; and never ceased her entreaties for the girl to be engaged until Heather said Bessie and the girls might walk over to North Kemms and talk to Mrs Dobbin about the matter.

Nothing loth was Mrs Dobbin for Priscilla to ‘go out,’ ‘except,’ she said, ‘that in the matter of clothes she feared Prissy warn’t fit to be seen in a gentleman’s house.’

‘Let her come over to me, and we will arrange that,’ Miss Ormson answered ; and accordingly, when Prissy came, out of her own wardrobe the young lady furnished that of the new servant—telling her at the same time, laughingly, she was ‘made up for life.’

‘And you may think yourself a lucky girl,’ remarked the mother on the first Sunday when Priscilla went home, about a month after her entrance on her duties at Berrie Down—‘having plenty of victuals, and good clothes to your back, and a kind mistress.’

John Dobbin was sitting in the porch during this colloquy, looking askance at his daughter's finery the while. When she came to exhibit her new dress to him he observed, first, that 'fine feathers didn't make fine birds,' and then inquired—

'Who was that chap I saw thee talking to last evening, this side Moorlands?'

'I warn't out yesterday evening, father,' answered the girl.

'Warn't thou?'

'No,' was the reply.

'Thou mayn't have told a lie about that harf-a-crown piece, but I doubt thou'rt telling a lie now, my lass,' he said.

'Well, you can ask Mrs Dudley if I went out yesterday,' retorted Prissy, defiantly.

'I take it Madam Dudley has something else to do than watch the coming and going of a wench like thou,' he answered; 'mayhap she don't know the one-half of what anybody in the house does; but I can tell thee this much, Prissy—that if I catches thee going wrong, I'll break every bone in thy body, if it was covered an inch thick with silks and satins.'

'I warn't out,' persisted Prissy.

'See that thou bain't then,' returned her uncompromising parent; and as the weeks and the months passed by without John having any further occasion to find fault with his first-born, it may reasonably be presumed that she heeded his admonition.

Further, in a general way, she gave satisfaction at the Hollow, where she was on good terms with every one, unless, indeed, it might be Master Marsden, who was, as she took various opportunities of informing him, an 'ill-behaved limb,' and no 'young gentleman.'

The last occasion on which Priscilla found herself moved to this confession of faith, was when she boxed Master Marsden's ears for holding Muff, and instructing Leonard to rub turpentine over her coat, preliminary—so she ascertained from Lally, who came rushing to her in an agony of distress—to 'making a bonfire of my poor tittens.'

That Master Marsden never forgave this interference with his legitimate pleasures, and that his wrath was very grievously moved,

both at Lally's tale-bearing and Prissy's prompt interference, may be gathered from the fact that he informed Lally she was a 'nasty little tell-tale tit.'

'Lally not,' lamented the child.

'Yes, you are—and "your tongue shall be slit, and every little puppy-dog shall get a little bit,"' persisted Master Marsden, with his own tongue very far out; adding, to Priscilla, by way of appendix to this poem—

'As for you, you ugly, snub-nosed, green-eyed little ——'

'No names, Harry,' interposed Alick, who chanced to come up at the instant; 'and what have you been doing with the cat? What's all this, I ask?' and he looked angrily round the group.

'I was only going to singe her hair; it is too long, like some people's tongues,' answered the boy, impudently.

'Now look here, Harry,' said Alick; 'I won't take you to Arthur, because he would not lay a finger on you; but I'm your brother, and I'll give you a thrashing for this you'll perhaps remember. Teaching Leonard such tricks, too, you cruel little cur!'

'Cur yourself!' retorted Harry; and in a moment he was grappling with Alick, trying to wrest the riding-whip he held out of his hand—kicking, plunging, biting even; and all the time Alick kept shaking and striking him,—Lally crying bitterly the while, —till, panting and frightened, the boy shrieked out for mercy.

Then the elder loosed his grasp and bade him go, saying, 'Though you make such a noise I know you are not much hurt, but never let me catch you playing such tricks again, or I will hurt you next time.'

'I'll be even with you all yet,' observed Harry, gratefully, as he skulked away; and this threat, which probably had not the slightest meaning attached to it in the boy's mind, was remembered to his disadvantage subsequently.

When the day came that it was remembered, no one believed his declaration of not having 'meant anything'—of not having intended to do anybody any harm. When every creature in the house treated him like a pariah, and avoided him as though he had leprosy, Harry felt that he could better have endured a dozen worse thrashings than such social ostracism. When his assertions

were received with silent incredulity—when his questions were answered reluctantly and with withering disdain and dislike—when his food was handed to him, as if he were some unclean animal, unfit to eat or associate with civilized beings—when there was a great silence in the house—when people went about on tip-toe, and, if they met the boy, passed him either with averted heads or with looks of reproach and anger—when Leonard turned king's evidence and bore testimony against him—when he sat in his own room, or else wandered about the farm, kicking twigs and stones listlessly before him—Harry felt it was all more than he could bear, and, turning at last on Cuthbert, told that youth he did not see why they were all so hard upon him. 'You were not a bit better, any one of you, when you were young,' he finished, passionately.

'We did not try to kill people,' answered his step-brother with dignity, as he retreated from the room, followed by Harry's indignant remonstrance of—

'No more didn't I—no more didn't I!'

CHAPTER XV.

HEATHER'S DARLING.

It was late in the autumn, as I have said; the leaves were falling rapidly, and, but for the constant sweeping and supervision of 'the boys,' the walks and lawns at Berrie Down would have been littered with the decaying foliage.

As it was, barrowful after barrowful of dead leaves disappeared from the grass in front of the drawing-room windows, and often as not Lally sat on the top of the load which Alick or Cuthbert wheeled away to a corner of the kitchen-garden, and there deposited in a great heap to make leaf-mould for the next year's geraniums.

No more pride than Lally had these young Dudleys. If work

were not to them prayer, it was, at all events, pleasure. It would have been a weary life to those lads, lounging about the Hollow, taking purposeless walks, rising in the morning to do nothing, going to bed at night after having performed no task, executed no duty ; but, as matters stood, each season brought its labours with it to them. They loved the place, and they loved Heather, and they loved work.

What need is there to say more ? because of all these reasons, Berrie Down looked the Berrie Down we have visited.

But a change was coming, and Heather knew it—knew Alick was going away, that her best helper was about to be taken from her. Many a talk had the pair held together over the inevitable parting ; many a word had they exchanged in the twilight, under the shadow of those dear old trees ; and, if Alick thought Bessie's words and talk had been more sad and more attractive, still he knew Heather's discourse was the best, and so listened to it attentively.

'You have been my very right hand, Alick,' she repeated over and over again ; 'and I do not know what I shall do without you.'

'Nor I without you, mother,' he answered, sadly.

'And you are going all alone, my boy, to a place which every one says is very, very wicked. I do not know much about wickedness myself, Alick,' she added, with that sweet simplicity that made her seem so inexpressibly innocent to people who *did* know much about that wicked world, which was a *terra incognita* to Heather Dudley ; 'but I hope, dear, that a person may be as good in London as in the country ; that you will not be led away, nor fall into expensive habits, nor associate with undesirable people, if only for my sake, Alick.'

'You darling mother !'

'If ever any one asks you to do what is wrong, if you are ever tempted to extravagance, to folly, or to sin,' she added, 'think of me at Berrie Down, and of how your trouble would grieve me, Alick, will you ?'

'Mother, there is no need for fear ; I hope there is no need.'

'I hope not, either,' she answered ; 'but yet who, setting out to travel a strange road, can tell what companions he may meet

with by the way—what troubles may assail him? More than all, Alick,' and the sweet voice which was never hurried, never much excited, grew low and pleading as she spoke, 'If ever you do fall into any trouble, promise to come and tell me; promise, whether I can help you or not, to come and talk it over. If you cannot come to me, I will go to you; and do not think any sin or sorrow—however bad it may seem to you—too bad to tell me. If you have to bear its consequences, I can bear to hear of it. Promise me, Alick! If I think you mean to keep no great sorrow from me, I can let you go—not otherwise.'

'Mother—Heather—what are you afraid of?' he asked.

'I am afraid of nothing except the indefinite,' she answered, through her tears. 'It is a new country to me, this life on which you are entering. Were I going to explore it myself, probably it would not seem so terrible. Promise, Alick.'

'I promise,' he answered; and then their talk flowed on to calmer ground—to such commonplace affairs as, 'where he should lodge, what amount of worldly belongings he should take with him, what edibles it would be advisable for Heather to send for him to his London home.'

In all these minor matters Mrs Dudley was intensely interested; not that the other subjects on which she had touched lay further from her heart, but only that they seemed less within her province than such homely affairs as seeing that his linen was in proper order, that he had flannels for the winter, and an abundant supply of towels and soap, to say nothing of more animal luxuries, in the shape of fresh butter, preserves, poultry, and eggs.

It was arranged how all these necessities, which Mrs Piggott believed were to be had genuine nowhere out of Hertfordshire, could be forwarded periodically to London; and then Heather set to work on Alick's wardrobe—condemning socks, examining shirts, turning over collars, and so forth.

'Alick had better take everything new with him,' she said to Agnes, 'and leave these for Cuthbert;' and the poor soul sighed.

Perhaps she felt intuitively Alick would never require her again to furnish him with an outfit—that from the day his foot passed

forth from Berrie Down he would never need hosen nor shirt from her more.

The great change was at hand, such as arrives to the mother when her darling marries a husband able to provide her with her heart's desire, and more than her heart's desire, if such a thing were possible ; to the sister, whose brother's wife takes from that day forth to all eternity charge of the mending, airing, and making of an idol's linen, and it was natural at such an hour Heather should desire ' her boy's ' wardrobe to be unexceptionable, that she should wish the very stitches in his collars, the very marking of his clothes, to remind him of the ' far-away home,' where she would never cease praying he might be kept from all the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Dear Heather ; oh ! dear, dear Heather ! I know cleverer women do greater things than your imagination ever compassed—that they write books and paint pictures, that they compose music and preach sermons, that they scribble reviews and manage warehouses, that they are owners of various business establishments in the City, and serve writs to unsuspecting debtors ; and yet I doubt if all these mementoes of women's work and women's talents would rest so long in the mind as one sweet word from you !

All this time she had full leisure to devote to Alick, for Arthur was away, staying at no other place than Copt Hall, where, through the instrumentality of Miss Alithea Hope, both he and Heather had been invited to spend a week.

Of his cousin, Arthur had hitherto known as little as his cousin knew of him ; but on her return to Copt Hall, after many years of absence, it became the desire of Miss Hope's life to promote an intimacy between the respective families.

' He is your own cousin,' she said to Walter Hope, ' and it is really scandalous that you do not visit each other ; ' acting on which hint, often repeated, Mrs Walter Hope wrote a very gracious note to Heather, trusting she and her husband would spare them a few days before all the fine weather was gone. Mrs Walter Hope laid considerable stress on the point, that she and Mr Hope were much distressed at the fact of such near relations and neighbours remaining for so long a time comparative strangers. She

hoped for the future they should see much more of each other. She had heard so much about Mrs Dudley from dear Miss Hope that she felt as if she (Heather) were quite an old acquaintance. She described the best railway route from Palinsbridge to Foldam (the station nearest to Copt Hall), just as if Arthur had never journeyed there in days gone by, and begged to know on which day and by what train Mr and Mrs Dudley were likely to arrive, in order that the carriage might meet them.

Never was a more cordial letter penned, and Arthur, with new prospects of wealth before him, did not read it ungraciously.

On the contrary, he extracted an augury of success from these overtures of friendship, and urged upon Heather the advisability of accepting Mrs Hope's invitation.

But Heather did not wish to go, at least not at that particular juncture. She had much to do, she told Arthur. She had to set her household in order after the summer visiting; she had to make and to mend; she wanted to be with Alick during the latter part of his sojourn at Berrie Down; she was tired, really tired, of talking and company, and desired rest; all of which reasons only provoked Arthur, and caused him to declare that she thought of every person except him, and acceded to every person's wishes except his.

Then Heather with a smile told him she knew he was not in earnest, and added that she had another reason for wishing to remain at home, viz. the state of her wardrobe.

'Dress which is quite sufficient for me at Berrie Down,' she said, 'would scarcely be suitable at Copt Hall.'

Upon that Arthur gave his wife a fifty-pound note, and bade her get what she wanted; but Heather, turning very white, folded up the note, and handed it back to him, saying, 'I would rather not, dear; I would indeed—'

'And why not?' he demanded.

'Because I do not think we can afford it,' she answered, 'at least not yet,' she added, seeing how vexed he looked.

'Not yet! Will you tell me what you mean, Heather?'

'Why, I mean, Arthur, that though you have not told me anything of what you are doing, still, I cannot be blind. I see the

stock gone, the crops sold. I know you are engaged in some business with Mr Black, and that there is money needed for it. You would never have sold the crops so soon, had there not been a necessity for selling them; and then, Arthur, perhaps, when Christmas comes, you may want all the money we can save, and I should not like to spend any unnecessarily now.

‘I shall have money long before Christmas,’ he answered.

‘You may,’ she said, ‘but you may not. I cannot tell what it is you are doing or expecting, but—’

‘Hang it!’ broke in Arthur, ‘is a man bound to tell his wife everything? When you can’t help me—when you would only be trying to dissuade me from my purpose, and keep me from ever rising out of the slough of poverty in which I have passed year after year—why should I talk to you about what I am doing or expecting? Women’s ideas are so contracted; they take such short views; they are so cautious, and so fearful, and so fond of certainties, that there is no use in even trying to make confidantes of them. Because you are happy yourself here, Heather, you think I ought to be so too; because you can endure the cursed monotony of such a life, you would keep me bound to the wheel for ever.’

‘I think you are a little mistaken,’ she answered. ‘I have been very happy here; I do love Berrie Down very much; but I would leave it to-morrow, and go with you anywhere in the world, if I thought by so doing I could contribute to your comfort, happiness, or prosperity.’

‘If you thought,’ he repeated. ‘Ay, there’s just the rub; you never could think so.’

‘If *you* thought that leaving Berrie Down would make you happier, I would do it. I would do anything for you. I have tried to please you, Arthur,’ she went on, speaking almost entreatingly. ‘I have never contradicted your will. I have never put myself in opposition to you. I have never teased you with questions. I have striven to do my best; but, as you are not satisfied, tell me how I can do better; and it shall not be my fault if I fail. Only, Arthur, only don’t let us drift away from one another; don’t let us begin to have secrets, and treat me as though I had done something to shake your trust and confidence in me.’

Never before had Arthur Dudley seen his wife so moved ; never before had he heard such a sentence from her lips. For a moment he felt tempted to tell her all ; to make a full and ample confession ; to explain to her not merely that his stock was gone, and his crops also, but that he had put his 'name' on paper, to an extent which, if the Protector Bread and Flour Company failed to fulfil the hopes of its promoters, would certainly cripple his resources seriously.

Of course his name was only 'lent ;' but occasionally misgivings would cross his mind that in the event of any hitch occurring, he might be liable for the whole amount of every bill which was at that moment wandering about London, passing from hand to hand.

If the Protector 'smashed up,' to use Mr Black's concise phrase, Arthur Dudley would be smashed up with it ; he had gone on little by little, till he was afraid of reckoning how much of Berrie Down was set up in type at Printing House Square, and in various newspapers throughout the country.

If the Protector failed—but then the Protector could not fail—and because it could not fail, and because if it did fail so much must go with it, Arthur decided not to tell his wife (who would be certain to look on the worst side of things), but to humour her, as Mr Black recommended, and answer—

'I do not know, Heather, what you mean by drifting away ; you and the children are never out of my thoughts by day or night. I have gone into a very good thing with Mr Black, in company with Lord Kemms, Mr Allan Stewart, Mr Aymescourt Croft, and a number of other persons, all gentlemen of position and fortune, not likely to rush into any foolish speculation. I hope to be a wealthy man yet. I hope to get rid of this eternal worry about money—which makes life not worth the having. I know you would help me, Heather, if you could ; there, there, don't look pitiful. I can't bear it. There is nothing you can do for me now, except buy yourself some handsome dresses, and come over to Copt Hall.'

She put her hand out to take the money, then a second time she returned it to him, saying, 'Let me have my own way this time, Arthur ; when you have made your fortune, I will spend as much money as you like ; only till you have made it I should

not feel happy to be extravagant. Don't be angry, love!' she pleaded; 'don't be vexed because I ask to have my own will for once in a way.'

'Once in a way!' repeated Arthur. 'Always, you mean, don't you? No, I'm not angry; stay at home, if you like. I do not think that there are many husbands who would press their wives so much to accompany them;' and with this undeniably true remark, Arthur Dudley strode out of the room, leaving Heather to think over the matter at her leisure.

Very patiently she did so—very resolutely she took up the facts of her married life, and looked at them from beginning to end. There was nothing new in what she saw—nothing. It had been coming upon her for months past, that she did not possess—had never possessed—her husband's love. When she beheld Gilbert Harcourt's devotion to Bessie, she knew Arthur had never been similarly devoted to her. She was not the love of his life, and neither was she the friend of his heart. He trusted in others; he confided in others. What was the reason of all this? Was it a fault in herself, she wondered. If it were, how did it happen that the boys and the girls, the men-servants and the maid-servants, and the stranger who came within their gates, all turned to her for sympathy and companionship? Without any undue vanity, it was still impossible for Heather not to know that she was greatly beloved by those with whom she came in contact; and yet, what was the use of being beloved, if the one person on earth she cared for threw her off?

Threw her off! Had they ever been near enough for him to do so; were not they quite as near now as ever they had been? Was it not only the blessed darkness of her mental vision which had hitherto kept her from discovering this fact? 'He never loved me,' Heather decided—'never; and he has found it out too late.'

And then there came over her soul a terrible pity for him, which swallowed up all sense of personal wrong—all anger—all selfishness. She could not unmarry him; she could not give him the woman he might have loved, the wealth that might have made him contented. She was no heroine—this Heather of mine; tragedy was not in her nature. The idea of freeing him from the

yoke under which he had voluntarily put his neck, never occurred to her. To flee to the ends of the earth, to part from him, leaving a note of insufficient explanation behind ; to rush off with the first man who whispered a few civil words to her, and let her husband walk through the Divorce Court to liberty ; to purchase a little bottle of poison and kill first her children and then herself—these very feasible and proper courses, were ideas which never even crossed Mrs Dudley's mind.

Outside of lunatic asylums, amongst the decorous and unexcitable people to be met with in society, or when we take our walks abroad, we are told, by those who profess to know their fellow-creatures thoroughly, that such impulsive, devoted, unselfish creatures exist ; but Heather's imagination never soared to such heights of passionate self-sacrifice.

They were married, and the time for even thinking of parting with Arthur being past for ever, all she could do was to try to make him as happy as possible.

For who could tell? like David, she thought that the Lord might be gracious to her, that some day, perhaps, Arthur would know how much she loved him, and give her back a portion of love in return.

But, meantime, she never blinded herself—from the hour knowledge began to dawn, she never refused to open her eyes and see the dull grey morning-sky of reality which had broken for her. Though she did not sit down and weep, still she made no attempt to fly from the presence of her trouble. There came no change over her face, unless it might be that the look of which I have previously spoken, oftener sat like a brooding shadow across her eyes. She did not weary her husband with her affection, or load him with caresses ; yet, although an ordinary observer could have detected no difference in her manner, Arthur had long felt there was a change ; that his comfort was more considered, if that were possible, than formerly ; that his every wish was anticipated ; that his caprices were more attended to, his complainings more rarely combated, than of old. He felt there was a change, though he could not have put a name on that change ; and as it irritates sick people to be humoured, so it irritated Arthur to find that even

the faint opposition of old was withdrawn—that, let his commands be as unreasonable, as fretful, as provoking as they would, they were still obeyed implicitly.

Never, excepting where some question of right and wrong was involved, did Heather lift up her voice in opposition to his, and he was, therefore, the more annoyed and surprised when Heather ventured to demur about going to Copt Hall.

‘So deucedly provoking, too, when I wanted her, and just at this time,’ he remarked to Mr Black whom he met in London—that being the route he took to Copt Hall—whereupon Mr Black said, consolingly—

‘That, perhaps, it was as well; Mrs Dudley might have put her foot in it.’

‘She would have come if I had pressed her, you know,’ continued Arthur, not wishing Mr Black to believe Heather the better horse at Berrie Down; ‘but I was not going to do that.’

‘You had a bit of a tiff, I suppose, is about the English of the matter,’ commented Mr Black. ‘Well, such things will happen, even in the best-regulated families.’

‘We had no tiff,’ answered Arthur; ‘my wife is the last woman on earth to make a row about anything.’

‘I am aware of that, of course,’ said Mr Black, drily; ‘but still she does not go to Copt Hall.’

‘Oh! damn Copt Hall!’ exclaimed Arthur.

‘No, no, don’t do that yet—not, at any rate, till we see if Walter Hope, Esquire, J.P., will appear on our direction—eh!’ suggested the promoter, poking Arthur into the ribs, and winking slyly as he spoke. ‘Never mind the wife, Dudley, she’ll come to no fear, when she sees our spec succeed, and you keeping your carriage and horses, and having your box at the Opera, and God knows what besides. Don’t trouble yourself about any persons’ thoughts now; their thoughts will be all right when you have a clear five thousand a year, and the chance of adding another five to that. Never fear; those that win, laugh, you know.’

And with this assurance Arthur departed for Copt Hall, where he was most cordially received and most hospitably entertained,

and where he met again, after years, Mr and Mrs Douglas Aymes-court Croft.

Meanwhile, Heather remained at home, doubtful whether she had done right in refusing to accompany her husband, in throwing cold water on his proposal that she should array herself like the Queen of Sheba, and thus attired, repair to the courts of Arthur's relatives.

She could not decide the question to her own contentment—she could not satisfy her understanding as to whether, when a woman promises to obey a man, she thereby excludes herself ever after from all title to take up her own parable and express her opinions boldly.

She knew other women had no such qualms of conscience—that to most of the wives she knew obedience was a dead letter; but this did not prevent Heather fretting and fidgeting. She had vexed her husband at a time when she wanted most to please him, and he had told her before he left, when he saw her busy with preparations for his brother's departure, that she 'liked Alick better than she did him—that she thought of studying every person's pleasure sooner than his.'

'I do not know what to do, I am sure,' she reflected, as she drove over to South Kemms in an old tumble-down, rattling phaeton, that was the very shame of Arthur's life, but which she, nevertheless, preferred to the, in her opinion, still more dilapidated fly from the Green Man at Fifield, which was in the habit of conveying visitors to Palinsbridge Station; 'I do not know what to do.' She had written every day to Arthur since his departure, but never a line did he vouchsafe to her in return, and she was wondering whether she ought or ought not to write again.

'Of course, if I do not tease him to answer, if I merely send a line to say we are all well, it cannot seem like worrying,' she decided; and having so decided, she made her purchases (which were principally in Alick's interest) at South Kemms, returning home with Ned, who was charioteer, as the evening shadows were settling down upon the Hollow.

When she reached the door, Alick was there to help her alight, and carry in her shawls, and wraps, and parcels.

She was full of her little purchases : a woman must, indeed, be in a terrible state of despair—a depth of despondency too great for a spectator to contemplate calmly—when the prospect of opening a draper's parcel fails to send a thrill of expectant pleasure through her heart.

'Take them into the dining-room, Alick,' she said. 'Oh! I am very glad to see that fire, it is so cold out of doors;' and she walked into the apartment and pulled off her bonnet and threw back her mantle, and stood with her hands stretched out towards the blazing coals, warming her numbed fingers.

'Where are the girls?' she asked, at length.

'Up-stairs,' Alick answered, stooping over the parcels he had brought in as he spoke.

'Is anything the matter?' Heather asked, quickly turning from the fire. He had only uttered one word, and yet his tone filled her with a vague alarm.

'Is anything the matter?' she repeated, finding he did not reply. 'Alick, look at me; why do you keep your face turned away?'

Then Alick looked up, but his eyes fell under Heather's scrutiny.

'Alick, tell me this instant what is the matter,' she said. In a moment her fancy conjured up all sorts of horrors—her husband was dead, there had been a railway collision, perhaps. Thought is sometimes as quick in our waking moments as in our dreams; and her imagination flew to him over all the miles that intervened between them. 'You have heard bad news,' she went on. 'Is it about Arthur; is he ill?'

'Not that I know of,' Alick answered. 'But, mother, we have had an accident since you went away.'

'An accident?' she repeated. 'What kind of an accident—what is it—who is it! Alick, you will drive me mad if you stand there looking at me without speaking.'

He tried to speak, but he could not do it; he had been nerving himself up to tell her, and now, when the moment came for explanation, the words died away upon his lips.

'Heather,' he began, in a tone of deprecating entreaty,—and then suddenly the truth flashed upon her.

'It's Lally,' she cried; 'it's Lally; oh! my child.'

He caught her as she was about to rush past him out of the room. 'Mother, mother,' he said, 'listen to me; she fell into the mill-pond, and they brought her home, and the doctor is here, and we have been doing everything.'

'And she is dead!' finished Heather.

'No, she is not,' said Agnes, entering at the moment. 'She has this instant opened her eyes;' and she broke out sobbing almost hysterically.

'Thank God!' exclaimed Alick, solemnly, after the manner of a person rescued from some fearful danger.

Then Heather, looking from one to the other, understood that while she had been driving to South Kemms, and making her purchases, and never thinking of evil, her darling had been standing in the very valley of the shadow—that she had brushed garments with the angel of Death; and her first feeling, when she did understand all this, was, not one of gratitude that her child was saved, but of anger and resentment at her ever having been permitted to get into danger.

She had not encountered the ordeal which the younger Dudleys passed through while Lally lay seemingly dead before them; she had not fought for the child as they did, both before and after the doctor's arrival; she had not endured the agony—an agony not to be described—which filled Alick's heart when he met the little body being carried home across the fields; she had not ridden for the doctor and followed him from house to house as hard as the best horse in Arthur's stables could gallop; she had not stood in suspense by the bed-side; she had not wondered with them, 'How shall we tell Heather—what will Heather say?'

That had been the one thought of every person in and about the house,—'What will Heather do; what will Mrs Dudley say!'

The very regret for Lally seemed merged in dread of her mother's sufferings.

How should any one face Heather and tell her Lally's life was still problematical? Who should prove brave enough to break the tidings to her, and look upon her agony?

Through the whole of this suspense and anxiety the younger Dudleys had passed; but how was Heather to understand every-

thing in a moment? The only certainty she comprehended was that her darling had been left to get into danger—that she had almost lost her child ; and so she cried aloud in her terror and her anger,—

‘Was there not one of you that could have seen to her—not one amongst you all?’

They never answered her—they could not tell her then how it had come to pass ; they were so thankful at even a chance of life being given to the child, that they did not mind the mother’s reproaches, though it seemed strange to them to see Heather angry.

There are times when it appears a less weighty trouble to behold a friend angry than sorry ; and so they bore her blame in silence, and made way for her to pass out, only remarking—

‘She is very ill, remember ; had you not almost better stay down-stairs for a little time longer?’

As if she did not hear their words, Heather walked blindly across the hall, groping her way to the staircase. When Alick would have taken her by the arm, she thrust his proffered help aside, and guiding herself by the balusters, managed somehow to reach the first floor.

There she paused, and put her hand to her head, seemingly trying to remember something.

‘She is in your room,’ Alick said, thinking she wished to know where the child lay ; but it was not that ; as she tried to move forward again, she tottered, and, had Alick not caught her, would have fallen.

‘Lay her on my bed,’ Agnes whispered ; and Alick accordingly carried his burden into one of the pleasant chambers, the windows of which, however, now looked forth on lifeless trees and bare brown branches, waving mournfully to and fro in the night, as the autumn wind rushed across the deserted fields and over the Hollow.

CHAPTER XVI.

POOR LALLY.

TIME and tide, we are assured, wait for no man ; which, though a truth, is but a portion of one, since happy would we be if, in this world, time and tide were the only things that refused to delay their departure for our convenience.

There are many circumstances of our daily lives, against which it would be as vain to appeal—to which it would serve quite as good a purpose to cry aloud for mercy, as the typical hour and tide.

For the first time in his life Alick Dudley realized this fact, when he found he must depart for London, and leave Heather in the very midst of her trouble, with no one at hand to ‘see after her,’ so the lad expressed himself.

‘I will,’ said Agnes, reassuringly.

‘Yes ; but you are not a man, Aggy,’ he answered ; ‘that is the worst of it.’ And though, in some respects, Agnes was almost as good as a man, still she sighed deeply, feeling her inferiority.

What was there a man could not do ? A man could lift heavy weights, and think nothing about them ; a man could fling a saddle on a horse, and put a bridle in his mouth, and gallop off for a doctor, without first going about the house wondering whom he could send ; a man could jump into the mill-pond and bring Lally out, holding her suspended in mid-air, as a cat does its kitten ; a man could go out in all weathers, he could undertake to break bad news ; the very sound of his voice in the house was a reassurance ; his very tone of command a trumpet which recalled the scattered senses of a tribe of frightened females. Without Alick—boy though he almost was—what would Berrie Down be ? a camp without a chief. Even if Arthur were back, they would all miss Alick. He was so prompt, he was so daring, he was so utterly unfeminine in every respect.

Now, many feminine qualities were possessed by Arthur ; and, therefore, even if the Squire had been at home, he could never

have proved of the same use in the house as his much younger brother Alick.

There has been a great deal written of late years about masculine women. It seems rather one-sided for no one to preach against feminine men ; for if a woman be objectionable in so far as she resembles a man, a man must surely be objectionable in so far as he is dependent, and weak, and timid, and faint-hearted, and undecided, and variable, and impulsive, and easily influenced, and speedily depressed, and equally speedily rejoiced, and governed by the opinions of others, and dependent on external influences, like a woman.

I lift my hand in supplications, and cry earnestly for mercy, ladies, as I finish this sentence, which I believe to be true as sorrow and pain. There is another cry which is popular now-a-days, and the man or the woman who raises an opposition shout is likely to find small favour in the crowd ; but the opposition shout is none the worse for that.

A man is a divine institution, even in a domestic point of view. He may not be charming pottering about a house, counting the camellias, and instituting inquiries into the items of a grocer's bill ; but he is at a premium when a gun wants cleaning, or a troublesome tramp grows insolent.

In precise proportion as he fails to load his pistols, or face a danger, whether moral or physical, as he is lazy, self-indulgent, wanting in energy, his merits fall below par ; and the man, spite of his sex, in point of usefulness is at a discount.

Never at a discount Alick Dudley was likely to be ; and that truth, even while she sighed, Agnes dimly grasped. She did not know, she really could not imagine, what they were all to do without her brother ; more especially at that juncture, when there was terrible sickness in the house—when, more than ever before in her life, Heather wanted help, and consolation, and encouragement. And yet Alick must go ; the laws of the Medes and Persians were as likely to be reversed as the rules hung up in the clerks' office in the great warehouse of Messrs Elser, Wire, Hook, and Elser, Wood Street, City.

Time and tide would about as probably wait the convenience of

mankind, or humour the whims of womankind, as those gentlemen accept as apology for Alick's non-appearance the fact of his niece being ill, and his sister-in-law in trouble.

According to the mood in which the firm chanced to be, the members composing it would have intimated to Alick, either that it was a matter of the supremest indifference to them if the whole of his relations were dead and buried, or suggested that he had made a mistake in applying to them for a situation, since it was evidently a nurse's berth he wanted at one of the hospitals.

But, in whatever form of words they had couched their rejection, that rejection would have certainly been inevitable. No blame to the Messrs Elser and Co. Of course the world cannot stand still because children fall ill, and women like to have their male relations near them in times of trouble.

Heather, indeed, would have been the first to recognize this truth, had there arisen any question concerning it; but in that quiet Hertfordshire home it never occurred to a single soul within its walls that there could be a moment's hesitation in the matter.

Alick had to go; and, accordingly, he packed up his clothes, bade good-bye to 'the mother,' not without tears, kissed all his sisters, received quite a volume of maternal advice from Mrs Piggott, together with a box of sandwiches, prepared, apparently, under an impression that he was going to the Canary Isles, and had not the remotest chance of getting anything to eat till he arrived there; and, in the grey dawn, drove over in the pony cart to Palinsbridge, where he caught the eight o'clock up-express, and entered the office of Messrs Elser, Wire, Hook, and Elser, at ten—the hour at which he had been bidden to put in his first appearance.

On the same day two letters were posted at Fifield: one to Arthur from Agnes—written in defiance of Heather's wishes—telling the Squire of Lally's accident, not lightly, as Heather had done, but fully and circumstantially, and informing him how ill, how very ill the child had remained ever since; and another, which having been penned with a great expenditure both of thought and ink, it may be as well to print it *in extenso*, for the benefit of my readers:

At 'bury-donne yollow

'fiefield

'arforshyre,'

it purported to be written, and the date was Monday, — 18— :—

'dere mis'—it began—'this coms with my dewtey hopeing yu ayre in good helth az it leves mee at preasant.

'dere mis, i hope yu will pardon the libberty i tayke in riting, but az wee are all in grate distres i thought graphs az yu mite like toe no.

'it's along of mis laly, who was nere drowned last Weak and who as layd almost for Ded yver since. dere mis it was al along of mastar marresden Which is az yu no a very bade Buoy, tha was al down at the mil, and miss laly She were a-standin cloze up to the brinck, wich were rong in she, but the Pore darelying new no Beter, when mastar marresden he sais to mastar lenarde—goe and giv her A Pusche and soe he Pusched hur inn, and she Was for Yver and Yver soe long in the Watter for the tew others was soe frytenned they colde doe nothyng but schream, and at Laste the myler's yf—She herde the crise and mr. scrotor he Mayde noe more addoo than intoe the Watter after hur, and Shee has bene verry bade yver sinc and Pore mrs. duddeley is like wun broaken Harted. She Wente of wen shee yerd the Knus, and it was a Long time befor shee comed too agen. mis laly is rowled up in franell and cryse a gode diel and dere mis i doant no wot is the mater with shee, but I Am Afraide it is hur death. mrs. duddeley she sais her Pore chylde is beter too-nite but i think it is Only a temporeairy feling. mrs. pigot sais shee thinks mrs. duddeley would be beter if her concert wuz at whome, but mrs. duddeley woan't hav him rote for, were i think she is rong. but dere mis i rite to yu without askhing noboddy's lefe, and i hop as you will Xuse the libberty. i have knot seen yu no whu sinc yu Went—and ples mis knot to sai az i have rote, becaus mrs. duddeley mite think az i had took to Mutch on mee, but i beleav yu augt to noe, and so hopeaing i have don rite i remain dere miss, with dewty,

'Yur yver afeckshionate thoe umble

'serveant

'prishila dobin.'

Without photographing the original document, which cost Miss Dobbin quite as much mental anxiety as an official despatch, it would be vain to hope to give an idea of the sort of manuscript through which Bessie Ormson at length arrived at the fact of Lally's serious illness.

It was blotted all over by accident and design. If by chance Priscilla spelt a word rightly, so surely she rubbed her finger through it, and wrote in another as unlike what it ought to have been as can well be imagined.

She had not a capital letter in its proper place from first to last, and it was many a day, in fact, before Bessie fully mastered the contents of that epistle.

But she gathered enough, almost in a first perusal, to convince her something was very wrong at the Hollow; and, although she had no invitation from Heather to do so, still she instantly resolved to start for Berrie Down.

With Bessie, as a rule, to resolve was to perform; and, accordingly, that very same evening she astonished the Dudley household by walking coolly in amongst her cousins as they were sitting down to tea.

'Well, and what is this about Lally?' she asked, after she had kissed the girls, and inquired for Heather; 'what is the matter with her?'

'Did Alick not tell you?' answered the assembled Dudleys in chorus.

'Alick,' repeated Miss Ormson. 'I have not seen Alick. I only heard a vague rumour this morning about something wonderful having occurred, and so I thought that I would come down and learn the certainties of the matter for myself. One of you girls, I think, might have written to tell me; but I suppose it is with you as with the rest of the world—out of sight, out of mind.'

'Heather would not let us write to any one,' said Agnes.

'Then Heather ought not to have had her own way,' retorted Bessie; 'and then, I suppose, she has been up with that child night after night, taking no rest, eating nothing, fretting herself to death.'

'We all wanted to sit up,' exclaimed Lucy Dudley, 'but she would trust no person.'

'Precisely what I expected,' said Bessie, who had by this time divested herself of cloak and bonnet, and now stood beside the fire looking as trim and pretty as though she had just stepped out of her dressing-room. 'And so Lally is very bad?'

'That is precisely what she says herself,' answered Laura. 'Whenever the pain leaves her for a minute or two, she settles down a little in the bed and whispers, "Poor Lally's very bad."'

'Is she in danger?' asked Bessie.

'I do not know; the doctor will not tell us.'

'Is Arthur at home?'

'No; Heather would not let him know how ill Lally was,' answered Agnes; 'but I wrote yesterday—not that I suppose he could do any good, if he were here.'

'She fell into the mill-pond?'—this was interrogative.

'She was pushed in,' answered Cuthbert, with a vicious look towards Harry, who sat at the farthest corner of the table with his legs tucked up under his chair, a great slice of bread and butter and honey in one hand, and a huge cup of tea in the other.

'I didn't push her in,' remarked that young gentleman.

'No, but you told Leonard to shove her,' said Cuthbert, shaking his hand at his brother menacingly.

'Well, how was I to know she would topple over like that?' persisted Harry. 'If she was loose on her perch, that wasn't my fault, was it? and it's not right of you to go on like that at me. Mrs Dudley said you wasn't to do it; she came and she talked to me, she did, and said she believed me, if nobody else didn't.'

'She must have great faith,' remarked Bessie, meditatively. 'If I had been her, Harry, I should have taken you down to the pond and given you a ducking on my own responsibility.'

'I shouldn't have cared if you had drowned me, then,' retorted Harry. 'There was not one of them would speak to me, and Alick would not let even Leonard come and say a word to me; and I was so miserable, I often thought of going out at night and throwing myself into the water, and that I knew would vex them all—only I was afraid of crossing the fields by myself in the dark;'

and at the bare recollection of his fear and trouble, Harry began to whimper.

‘If you had done that, you know,’ said Bessie, coolly, ‘you would have been buried at the four cross-roads on the way to South Kemms, with a stake through your body.’

‘I should not have minded what was done to me when once I was dead,’ said Harry, philosophically.

‘If you do not mind what you are about while you are living,’ answered Bessie, ‘you will come to the gallows.’

‘No more likely to come to the gallows than you, Miss Impudence, for all your red-and-white face and shiny hair, that you think so much of;’ and Harry put out his tongue as far as he could thrust it at Bessie, who, without ‘more ado,’ to appropriate an expression from Priscilla’s letter, walked round the table, and would have boxed the offender’s ears but that he disappeared from his chair and dived among the feet of the four Dudleys, one of whom, Cuthbert, was not slow about availing himself of the tempting opportunity thus offered.

‘You’re a coward,’ said the boy, reappearing on the other side with a very red face, and his hair all in a tangle, looking, as Laura said, like one of those things chimneys are swept with. ‘You’re a coward, to kick a man when he’s down. Come on, and fight it out.’

‘You had better behave yourself, Harry,’ answered Cuthbert, ‘or I will give you toko for yam,’ which mysterious threat evidently conveyed some definite idea to Master Marsden’s mind, for he answered:—

‘You could not, nor two like you.’

‘Shall I try?’ asked Cuthbert, rising; but Harry fled towards the door, and Agnes ended the quarrel by bringing the boy back to the table and seating him in his place, and warning both him and Cuthbert that they must not make a noise—that the doctor had said the house was to be kept as still and quiet as possible. ‘So, Harry,’ continued his sister, ‘do be good for once in your life; finish your tea and go to bed.’

‘Yes, that’s the way,’ grumbled Harry, his mouth full of bread, and his lips smeary and sticky with honey—‘that’s the way;’

finish, and go to bed ; finish, and go into the garden ; finish, and see what the men are doing ; it is always go, go, go, from morning till night.'

'Will you be quiet, and let other people hear themselves talking?' said Bessie, sharply.

'There are not many that would care to hear you talk, at any rate,' retorted Master Marsden ; 'it is gab—gab—gab ; bub—a bub—a bub—wherever you are, just like a meat-fly, or a wasp, or a mosquito.'

'I declare, Harry, I will write to your papa,' averred Bessie, solemnly.

'Write—who cares—and send somebody to read it, will you? We always call yours fat writing at home, and pa says if there was many hands like it, ink could not be made fast enough to supply people. Writing, do you call it? I could write as well with a paste-brush.'

'Are you going to be quiet, Harry, or are you not?' asked Bessie, taking a step towards him ; 'for, if you make another saucy speech, I will box your ears, as sure as my name is Bessie Ormson.'

'Who gave you that name?' mocked the boy ; whereupon Bessie proved as good as her word, and, seizing him, was about to administer condign punishment, when Harry cried out—

'If you do—if you do—I'll make a noise, and then Mrs Dudley will come down to know what is the matter, and then I'll tell her, and then she'll be angry with you, for she said nobody was to speak crossly to me while I stayed in the house.'

'It is quite true,' Agnes said, in answer to Bessie's look of inquiry. 'She thought we were not kind to him, and scolded him about Lally ; and in the middle of all her own trouble, of course, she had time to consider Harry. You see the result.'

'And pray, Harry, how long are you going to stay in the house?' inquired Bessie.

'As long as I like—as long as I find it convenient,' replied the boy ; 'but now, I tell you what ; I am quiet mostly, not because I care a button for all their threats, but because I promised Mrs Dudley I would—there now !'

‘You are a curiosity,’ remarked Bessie.

‘Not so much of one as you are. I don’t wear frizzle-gigs of things in my hair ; I don’t live in a steel cage ; I don’t screw myself in round the waist and walk this way,’ added Master Marsden, marching up and down the room in a style which he firmly believed to be an exact imitation of Bessie. ‘I don’t look from under my parasol—so ! and make up my face when anybody is in the room I want to think well of me ; I don’t wear kicking straps and dress improvers to make my petticoats stick out—like that ;’ and Master Marsden pulled out his knickerbockers to their fullest width, and treated society to another representation of Bessie ‘sailing across a room.’

If every one belonging to her had been dying at that moment, Bessie could not have refrained from laughing ; and in this mirth her cousins joined.

‘I suppose Harry thinks that is holding the mirror up to nature,’ said Lucy Dudley, at length.

‘No, Harry does not,’ retorted the young gentleman ; ‘he thinks it is holding the mirror up to art.’

‘I am art, then, am-I?’ inquired Bessie ; and Harry nodded assent.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘since it seems you have engaged this room for your performances, I will go up-stairs and see Heather.’

‘Had not I better go up first, and tell her?’ suggested Agnes.

‘Oh no,’ answered Bessie ; ‘good wine, you know, needs no bush ;’ and with that she left the apartment, and ascended to the sick-chamber, at the threshold of which she paused for a moment irresolute.

The door stood wide open, and across the entrance was hung a curtain, so that the watchers could pass in and out noiselessly.

Lightly Bessie lifted this curtain, and looked in. On the bed lay Lally, quiet enough to have satisfied all Mrs Ormson’s requirements—quiet enough and changed enough—a mere shadow of the Lally Bessie had scolded and teased, and loved and petted, in the glorious summer weather—a poor wasted little Lally—a Lally who was, as she herself said, ‘very bad indeed.’

And beside the bed sat Heather, looking so pale and worn that

it might well have been supposed she also had passed through very grievous sickness. The blue-veined lids were closed over the weary, aching eyes, when Bessie first lifted the curtain; but she had scarcely time to glance at the child and her mother, before Heather, feeling there was some one standing in the doorway, awoke and recognized her visitor with a start of glad surprise.

Making a sign for Bessie not to make a noise, she rose and came across the room.

‘I only heard this morning,’ the girl whispered, ‘and I could not rest. How is she?’

‘Better, I trust,’ Heather answered. They were by this time in Bessie’s old apartment, which looked as though she had only left it about an hour previously. That was the beauty of the Hollow—any one could drop into his accustomed place there, even after long absence, in five minutes.

‘Heather dear, you have suffered dreadfully.’

‘Yes; but God has been very merciful,’ Mrs Dudley answered. ‘Oh! Bessie, if she had died without my seeing her, I could not have borne it; there is no use in saying I could, for my heart must have broken. She has been frightfully ill. She was so long in the water, and then lying in her wet clothes while they carried her here. It was this side of the pond, you know, Bessie; and though Mr Scotter’s house might have been nearer, still it could not have made much difference in her recovery, and it has made all the difference to me having her at home. Fortunately, there were good fires in the house, and plenty of hot water. If there had been any longer delay, we cannot tell how it might have turned out. The girls and Mrs Piggott, Doctor Williams says, really saved her life; but I do not know—it seems to me everybody did what was possible. The worst of it was her being so long in the water, and so warm when she fell in—they had been racing, it appears; but if we can get her over this—and, please God, she will get over it—Doctor Williams assures me there is no reason why she should not be as strong as ever.’

‘I have come to help you nurse her,’ said Bessie. ‘Now, don’t begin making objections, Heather, because I know every sentence you would speak, and all I intend to reply is, that I mean to do

my share of the watching, or else let Agnes take it in turns with you, and I will try and see to things about the house—only I am resolved you shall not kill yourself. What will Arthur say when he comes home, and see you looking like a ghost? I declare, if I met you in the dark you would frighten me. Now, you shall lie down on the sofa to-night, and I will sit beside Lally.'

'But you will be completely knocked up.'

'You do not know much about my constitution, evidently,' answered Bessie, smiling: and thus the difficult matter was arranged, and thus once again Bessie Ormson became an inmate of the Hollow, where Arthur arrived on the following day, greatly to Heather's vexation; for she had tried to keep this trouble from him, not wishing, poor soul, to 'spoil his holiday.'

But Agnes' letter was so imperative, that the moment he read it he packed his portmanteau, asked his cousin to let him have the dog-cart as far as Foldam Station, and travelled by various circuitous routes from that out-of-the-world place to Hertford, where he thanked Heaven when he exchanged the Eastern Counties line of rail for the Great Northern.

'That Copt Hall is the most cursed place in England to get either to or from,' he remarked to Bessie.

'I have heard some ignorant people remark that Berrie Down Hollow is not the most accessible spot on earth; and I know I thought it rather out of the way the other evening,' answered Miss Ormson.

'It is next door to everywhere in comparison to Copt Hall,' he replied.—'So you really think,' he went on to say, 'there is no fear for Lally now—little monkey! Heather looks bad, though, does not she? I declare, Bessie, it was very kind indeed of you to come down, and I am greatly obliged to you for it.'

'Thank you, Arthur,' answered Bessie demurely; 'it is a happiness to know that my poor endeavours to give satisfaction have found favour in your eyes.' But although Miss Ormson replied to his gracious speech with so little appearance of astonishment, still she was secretly greatly surprised at the increased urbanity of his manners. 'Arthur is growing like other people,' she said to Agnes Dudley. 'Saul is coming among the Prophets. I wonder

if the Protector Bread Company has had any share in effecting this great change; if so, success to it, say I; may its career be happy and glorious—may its dividends prove satisfactory, and my uncle grow more prosperous, and more like a Puffin than ever!’ And then she returned to her watch beside Lally, who crept out of absolute danger surely, though slowly, and at length grew strong enough to sit up in bed, supported by pillows, and toss over scraps of coloured ribbons and bits of silk that Bessie would spread out over the coverlet for her.

After a minute or two, however, she would get weary of this game; the red and the blue would begin to dazzle her eyes; the little hands would grow too weak to toy among the bright trifles; the head would get tired with trying to raise itself over the edge of the sheet; and when all these things came to pass, Lally would drop the latest scrap of silk—heave a heavy sigh—look piteously at Bessie, and declare ‘Lally’s very bad aden.’

‘No, you are not,’ Bessie invariably answered; ‘you are scheming—you like being in bed this cold weather, and having nice things to eat, and being made much of; but wait a little. Some fine morning I will rout you up, and chase you about the lawn, and run you to earth in the Hollow. Won’t I; do you think I wont?’ and the lovely face was laid on the pillow beside the child, and Lally made nests for herself in Bessie’s hair, and was fain to fall asleep holding on by her pretty nurse’s gown, or sleeve, or collar.

‘Oh Lor’, Miss, ain’t she like wax-work!’ remarked Priscilla Dobbin, the first time she beheld Lally sitting up on Miss Ormson’s lap—held in Miss Ormson’s arms.

‘She is much more like bone-work to my mind,’ answered Bessie, kissing the little white arms; ‘but we are going to feed her up, and send her to market next time her papa goes to London—are not we, Lally?’

And Lally, complaisant as ever, answered, while busily engaged in counting over the buttons on Bessie’s dress, ‘Iss.’

CHAPTER XVII.

MR BLACK'S TARTAR.

PETER BLACK, ESQUIRE, of Stanley Crescent, sat in the Secretary's room at the temporary offices of the Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited, 220, Dowgate Hill, looking as much like a thrashed hound as it was possible for so pompous, and prosperous, and self-sufficient a gentleman to look.

As a rule, wherever he went, and with whatsoever manner of person he came in contact, Mr Black comported himself as if, so Mr Ormson familiarly said, 'he was cock of the walk;' but now Mr Black had met with a bigger and stronger and more arrogant cock than himself; a bird whose beak was strong and spurs sharp—who was accustomed to lording it over creatures of his own species—who would have been immensely astonished had Mr Black flown at him, and disputed his supremacy; but who, had such an affront been offered, would soon have cowed and discomfited his adversary.

Mr Black, however, mindful perhaps of his victories on other fields, was content to rest on his laurels, and refrained from striving to wrest any from the crown that bound in City circles the brow of Allan Stewart, Esquire, of Walsey Manor, Layford; Careyby Castle, Perthshire; Hyde Park Gardens, London; and 92, King's Arms Yard, Moorgate Street.

With a man who gave himself airs, Mr Black might perhaps have tried to get the mastery with success. He might have deferred, and flattered, and listened with apparent earnestness, while all the time he was winding his opponent round his finger; but Mr Stewart gave himself no airs; he did not aw—aw like the half-pay majors and poor middle-aged, dilapidated, disreputable swells with whom Mr Black had so often come in contact. He did not quote Latin, and talk of his great friends, like the patientless doctors and surgeons, and the parishless parsons, and the clientless lawyers, who also had been unto Mr Black's eyes familiar as the breath of life in his nostrils.

He was not recklessly indifferent to results, shamelessly greedy concerning money, openly careless as to whether a scheme floated or not, so long as he got out safe and netted a few hundreds, after the fashion of the insolvent esquires and bankrupt merchants, who would not—so Mr Stewart declared—have scrupled to put their names on the direction of a railway to the infernal regions, if only such statistics with regard to fares had been procurable as would have enabled them to show shareholders a prospect of a large dividend.

‘They would glibly tell the British public what Charon clears per annum, and state that great inconvenience was felt by passengers when the Styx was rough and the winds contrary. They would sell their names to anything on the earth, or in the waters under the earth ; in land, or sea, or sky ; in this world or the next, if only promoters’ and directors’ fees were to be had out of the scheme. Those are the kind of men you have been accustomed to deal with, Mr Black. It may save us, therefore, a vast amount of trouble hereafter if you clearly understand now that I am a different sort of man altogether.’

Mr Black inclined his head, and observed, somewhat confusedly, that he did not doubt it in the least.

‘Excuse me,’ said Mr Stewart, ‘but you did doubt it. You thought when you paid me that money, and promised me so many shares, and I gave you leave to use my name, and said I should go into the thing with you, that there was an end of me. You thought, when you heard I was abroad in the autumn, and at Walsey since my return, that I meant to leave the company in your hands, and meddle no further in the matter ; but, pray, do not think so any longer. I intend to take an active part in this business. I mean that it shall succeed ; and I have not the slightest scruple in informing you that it shall not be made a refuge for the destitute by anybody.’

‘I am at a loss to follow your meaning, Mr Stewart,’ said Mr Black, in answer.

‘I will try to explain myself more clearly,’ went on the great man. ‘When you came to me, and I said I could not entertain your proposal without a retainer, do you know what my object

was? No! Well, then, I took your five hundred pounds as a guarantee for your honesty. The sum was nothing to me; but I had no intention of having my time taken up about a company, the shares in which might never be worth *that!*' and Mr Stewart snapped his fingers contemptuously. 'I am perfectly plain, you see. I knew you had been connected with company after company. I knew, in fact, you were by profession a promoter of very bad schemes; but I knew, also, you had plenty of push, and that, if you saw it was worth your while to make a company succeed, you stood a fair chance of forcing it to do so.'

Mr Black bowed. These were the first civil words Mr Stewart had addressed to him during the interview; and, although the amount of compliment they contained might not be excessive, still there was a certain recognition of his executive and imaginative talents conveyed in them.

[For which reason Mr Black bowed.

'Now, if the thing be to succeed, it must not be swamped with sinecures and a multitude of ground landlords.'

Well enough Mr Black knew all Mr Stewart implied by that sentence; but, nevertheless, he asked him for further information.

'By ground landlords, I understand a number of persons who, considering the newly-discovered land their own, want to make off it as much as they can before anybody else touches a farthing—for instance, you are a ground landlord. Quite as well as I you know that Crossenham's mills are not worth the name of the price you have put upon them.'

'I assure you it is the very lowest price the Messrs Crossenham would take.'

'And that lowest price you share with them. I am not quarrelling with such an arrangement. The prospectus could not have been put forth without some mills being secured—and, perhaps, those mills are as good for the purpose of advertising from as any other; but still I happen to know all the ins and outs of that transaction,—that your paper has been keeping Crossenham afloat, that the machinery is very old, that the buildings are very dilapidated, and that, in fact, if you had not rushed to the rescue, Messrs Bailey and Robert Crossenham must have been gazetted

ere this, and that, in the event of such a calamity happening to them, the premises could have been bought for an old song.'

'What has that to do with me?' asked Mr Black. 'A man must live; and, like you, I cannot afford to spend all my time, and strength, and thought, and money, only to receive payment in shares.'

'True,' said Mr Stewart, with a dubious smile, which, however encouraged the promoter to remark further—

'The labourer is worthy of his hire.'

'Humph! that depends,' observed Mr Stewart.

'On what?' asked Mr Black.

'On how much work the labourer does, and on the extent of his hire.'

'Oh!' murmured the promoter.

'Your hire has not been excessive, as hire goes,' went on Mr Stewart, '*so far*; but I think you have run about the length of your just tether. I suppose, Mr Black, you are now satisfied, and mean for the future to rest content, with your extremely moderate supply of paid-up shares?'

'Did you think I was going to *give* the public this company?' demanded the promoter.

'If I had ever entertained such an idea—which I never did—you would speedily have disabused me of it,' answered Mr Stewart; 'but the point on which I now desire information is this: Are you going to be content with your promoter's fees, with your shares, with your profits on the Stangate mills, with your commission on printing, advertising, travelling, and the Lord knows what besides, or are you not?'

'I desire to make no further claim,' answered Mr Black.

'Then what is the English of this item—"Lease of premises in Lincoln's Inn Fields?"' demanded Mr Stewart, referring to a paper in his hand. 'What the devil do you mean by even proposing that the offices of the company should be stuck up there? We shall next be paying for the goodwills of depôts in Highbury New Park and Camden Square.'

'I do not see why the offices should not be in Lincoln's Inn Fields,' observed Mr Black.

‘And I do not see why they should be in any such graveyard,’ answered Mr Stewart. ‘Deuce a thing there is in Lincoln’s Inn except lawyers’ offices, and one or two places where they insure lives, and preserve skeletons, and grant licenses to kill. What connection has Lincoln’s Inn with bread-making? I must bring this matter before the board, but thought, in the first instance, I would give you a chance of explaining yourself to me.’

Mr Black looked at the speaker, and turned the last clause of his sentence over before replying. Meanwhile Mr Stewart stood on the hearth-rug, with his coat-tails tucked up over his arms, airing himself in true British fashion in front of the fire. In this attitude he looked a man of whom no person would have cared to solicit a cheque—to whom no defaulting debtor would have cared to prefer a petition for time in which to pay.

A gentlemanly-looking individual, no doubt, who could have handed Lady Grace down to dinner in an aristocratic and suitable manner—who could have received one of the blood royal after the fashion which is popularly supposed to obtain at Court ceremonies; a very charming personage, doubtless, when complimenting young ladies on their singing, or asking materfamilias if all those velvet-tunicked lads were hers; but not a nice man with whom to discuss money matters, not a pleasant man to try to take in—to strive to wind round your finger—to endeavour to make use of.

Vaguely, Mr Black, looking up at his grey-haired, hard-featured, plain-spoken visitor, grasped all this ere he answered:

“Lincoln’s Inn Fields is as good a place as any other in which to have our permanent offices. The address reads well. It implies to the country imaginative lawyers; and lawyers, it pleases country people to think, know what they are about. Further, it is central. Gentleman will not get their broughams knocked to pieces coming there, as they would do if they ventured with West End coachmen into the city. Moreover, if strangers staying at an hotel ask for Lincoln’s Inn Fields, any idiot of a waiter can direct them to the place. There is something about the sound of Lincoln’s Inn Fields which recommends itself to me. I cannot think why you object to the situation, Mr Stewart.’

'I object,' answered Mr Stewart, 'on two grounds: first, that I consider Lincoln's Inn Fields an unsuitable position; and secondly, that I consider the whole affair a job.'

'A job!' repeated Mr Black, reddening.

'Yes, sir, a job,' was the reply. 'Who is this Mr Dudley? How does he chance to be the owner of that desirable leasehold property which you are trying to get the company to buy? I see his name on the direction. Who is he?—what is he? Is there such a person as Arthur Dudley, Esquire? Is there such a place as Berrie Down Hollow at all?'

'What have I done, Mr Stewart, to justify such suspicion?' the promoter virtuously demanded. 'Have I tried to deceive you; have I made any false representations; did I enlist you in our ranks by any undue means? If you are not satisfied with the company and with me, why not resign; why not disassociate yourself from us *in toto*?'

Mr Stewart laughed. 'How long would your company live without me?' he asked: 'how long would your other directors remain on the board, if I withdrew my name from it? Rather, Mr Black, I might say, if you do not relish my interference, why do you not resign, why do you not take your shares and your promoter's fees, and your various little perquisites, and devote yourself to those other companies which have very decidedly been neglected while you were employed in dry-nursing the Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited?'

'That, then, is what you want me to do?' said Mr Black.

'No; I only, following your lead, suggested a course which I thought you might find it advisable to pursue. I mean to interfere in this company. I mean that it shall pay, and I do not mean that it shall expend enormous sums on the purchase of freehold, copyhold, or leasehold property, when renting offices and shops will serve our purpose equally well, or better. That house in Lincoln's Inn Fields shall not be bought—at that point I take my stand. The proposal is ridiculous; the situation is undesirable; the price asked preposterous. Mr Dudley seems not to be overwhelmed with modesty, or he never would have even thought of mentioning such a sum.'

'He knows nothing on earth of the value of property,' Mr Black declared.

'Oh, then it is your price. I thought as much; and you are to share the profit with him?'

'No,' the promoter eagerly replied; glad, at last, perhaps, to find some point where he could contradict Mr Stewart with advantage. 'No, Mr Dudley is the person who found the capital to work this company. So far, he has not derived one shilling benefit from it. He is not a business man; he has gone into this scheme solely on my recommendation.'

'Is he an idiot?' asked Mr Stewart.

'I have not associated much with idiots,' was the reply, 'and am therefore less competent to decide that question than you might be. But I should say, no. Considering he is a gentleman, and apt to believe what people tell him, I never saw any especial weakness of intellect about him. He is not rich, and yet he has, as I said, found the money to carry this matter through. When those premises in Lincoln's Inn were for sale, I advised him to buy them, and promised that they should be purchased by the company at a considerable advance on the price he paid. I consider the sum asked a fair sum; whether he make a profit or not, is no concern of ours.'

'Of mine, you mean,' amended Mr Stewart. 'It may be very much of your concern.'

'I am not to have a penny-piece out of the transaction, if that be what you would imply,' Mr Black replied.

'That was what I intended to imply,' said the other; 'and if it be a fair question, Mr Black, how did you chance to meet with this *rara avis*, who found the money to start your company and believed all you told him?'

Many a time in his life Mr Black had been bullied, and rebuffed, and snubbed, and irritated, but never before, never, had he been so coolly insulted—so insolently addressed, as by the very ordinary-looking, elderly individual, who, still airing himself at the fire, looked the promoter over—turned him inside out, as calmly as though Mr Black had been a bale of inferior goods submitted to his inspection.

There was an offensive superiority in Mr Stewart's manner which was very gall and wormwood to the person he addressed. Mr Black would have liked to order him out of the office, and to have enforced that order with a due administration of boot leather ; but, recollecting that kicking Mr Stewart out would not help him personally along the road to fortune, he wisely restrained his feelings, and answered—

‘I do not consider your question a fair one at all, sir. I never before came in contact with a gentleman who would not have hesitated about inquiring into such private particulars ; but I have no objection to telling you how Mr Dudley and I became acquainted. My wife is his aunt by marriage ; that is how I came to know anything of Squire Dudley, of Berrie Down.’

‘Now what the deuce does that mean ?’ said Mr Stewart, reflectively ; ‘aunt by marriage. You are not Mr Dudley’s uncle, I presume ?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Then is Mrs Black’s sister Mrs Dudley ?’

‘She was until after her husband’s death, when she married a second time. There were four sisters,’ glibly proceeded Mr Black, ‘all daughters of Alderman Cuthbert ; one died young, unmarried.’

‘The gods loved her, then, we may conclude,’ said Mr Stewart, grimly.

‘The eldest daughter married Mr Ormson, of Cushion Court, with whose name, I dare say, you are well acquainted.’

‘Yes, as that of a very honest, respectable man,’ acquiesced Mr Stewart, in a tone which implied that he never expected to hear one-half so much good of the person he addressed.

‘The second did me the honour of linking her fortunes with mine,’ went on Mr Black, at which speech his auditor smiled again, not pleasantly. ‘The youngest married Major Dudley, of Berrie Down, and—’

‘Is, consequently, this Squire Dudley’s mother,’ suggested Mr Stewart.

‘No, his mother-in-law,’ amended the promoter.

‘Stepmother, you would say, I presume,’ corrected Mr Stewart.

'So that is the relationship, is it?' and apparently he constructed a genealogical tree for his own edification on the instant, where hung prominently a matrimonial excrescence, with a pretty face and vulgar manners, sister-in-law to Peter Black, Esquire, of Stanley Crescent.

'Major Dudley's first wife, the present Squire Dudley's mother, was a daughter of Arthur Hope, Esquire, of Copt Hall, Essex.'

'Indeed!'

'You may have observed Mr Walter Hope's name on our direction?'

'I believe I did notice it.'

'You can make what inquiries you please about Squire Dudley,' went on Mr Black; 'indeed, the more inquiries you make, the better I shall be pleased. His position is perfectly unimpeachable. Excepting that he has not so much money as his friends could wish, I am not aware that there is a fault to be found with him or his surroundings.'

'For a man short of money, the purchase of a house in Lincoln's Inn Fields was surely a venture,' remarked Mr Stewart.

'He bought it, as I have said, on my advice,' answered Mr Black, who could be brave on occasion; brave as well as self-asserting. 'I thought, considering that with me originated the idea of this company; with me rested its very existence; on me devolved the organizing, carrying out, and perfecting of this scheme; I thought, I say, considering all these things, that when the concern came to be floated, a few of my suggestions would be received, and that I might do, at once, a good stroke of business for the company with which I was connected, and for the man who had stood by me and backed me up through thick and thin.'

'Your imagination outran your discretion, then,' remarked Mr Stewart. 'It is a dangerous thing for a man to try to benefit other people. Observe, the financial field has been reaped almost bare before he thinks of his acquaintances. You reaped and gleaned, Mr Black, and then you wanted a second crop for your friend. We allow your claims, but the claims of your acquaintances and relations must go to the wall.'

'I will give up three hundred of my claim on the mills, Mr Stewart, if you do not oppose the purchase of those premises in Lincoln's Inn Fields,' said the promoter, earnestly.

'Then the affair is serious?' suggested Mr Stewart.

'It is very serious,' answered Mr Black. 'Here is a man with property, worth, at the outside, ten thousand pounds, shall we say, and he advances money for advertising, and backs us up in every possible way with money, influence, connections. As a *douceur* for that, I advise him to buy that damned place in Lincoln's Inn Fields, fully intending that he should receive a good price for it from our company; and now you come, Mr Stewart, and put your foot in it; you come interfering, and meddling, and—'

'Mr Black, do you know how many shares I hold in this company?' asked Mr Stewart.

'A couple of hundred,' was the reply.

'Exactly two thousand,' answered Mr Stewart, 'and I mean them to repay me. They will not do so, as I said before, if we commence by making this company a refuge for the destitute; and although, no doubt, your friend Dudley is a delightful fellow and a confounded fool, still, with him I take my stand. Those premises may be rented if you will, but never purchased. Please to remember what I say, Mr Black—never purchased.'

Utterly crestfallen the promoter looked—utterly like a thrashed hound or a disappointed pick-pocket. Stronger and stronger grew the inclination to kick Mr Stewart off the premises; feebler and feebler grew his hopes of controlling the operations of the Protector Bread Company, Limited; and through all there was an awful sense of injustice—of it being a sin for him not to be able to do what he liked with 'his own;' with the baby he had conceived and brought into the world, and nursed into a great prosperous creature, the shares in which were already being eagerly inquired for.

'Then, what is Dudley to do?' he asked, feebly and impotently.

'Sell the place again as soon as possible,' advised Mr Stewart.

'That is all very well; but if he cannot sell?'

'In that case he must let.'

'And if he do not let?'

'In that case he must make the best he can of a bad bargain,'—and Mr Stewart shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say, 'If a man will be a simpleton, he must bear the consequences.'

'The matter shall come before the board,' remarked Mr Black.

'There is nothing to prevent its doing so, is there?' inquired Mr Stewart.

'And I wish to Heaven, sir—I wish to Heaven—I had been content to abide by good advice, and never asked you for your name, or influence, or—or anything,' finished Mr Black, in a fine frenzy. 'I could have carried the company through without your help; I should have been better without your interference; I should have had the management, to a certain extent, in my own power, instead—'

'Instead of having some one on the direction with an interest in the well-being of the concern,' finished Mr Stewart, who had by this time changed his position, and stood with one arm resting on the chimney-piece, staring into the fire. 'Look here, sir,' he went on, suddenly altering the tone in which he had hitherto spoken, 'it is as much your interest as mine that this company shall succeed. It may make a rich man of you if it do—it will certainly ease me of a considerable sum of money if it do not. Our hopes, therefore, are, or should be, identical. Is it to be peace or war between us? Will you work with me, or will you work against me? Are you going to make posts and give salaries to all the men you ever knew since you started in business? Do you mean to show Squire This and Captain That where a good stroke of business is to be done—where a snug nest-egg is to be obtained? Are you going to advance the well-being of the company, or make it subservient to the well-being of Jack, Tom, and Harry? How is this to be, sir?—let us clearly understand one another at once.'

'Is all this tirade merely because I advised Squire Dudley to purchase that house in Lincoln's Inn Fields?' asked Mr Black, sneeringly.

'No, sir; all this tirade, as you are pleased to call it, originates not at the doings in Lincoln's Inn, but at the various other doings in Dowgate Hill. Here, for example, who the deuce is this fellow

Harcourt, solicitor? Nobody knows who he may be, except that he is some friend or relative of yours. Then, again, there is Bayley Crossenham, Esquire, manager; Robert Crossenham, Esquire, secretary *pro tem*. It shall not be *pro tem*. long, believe me. Then the bankers are your own; the auditors are the same whose names were appended to that most rotten scheme of yours, the City and Suburban Gas Company; the brokers are men of comparatively no standing whatever; not a soul on the direction but has been 'qualified' by the gift of paid-up shares. I do not quarrel with that latter arrangement, for, with one exception, I think you have, so far as I can see, got a list of very good names—names that, perhaps, were worth paying for. By-the-way, I perceive Lord Kemms is on the direction.'

'Yes,' replied Mr Black, wincing, however, a little at the implied question; 'he is next neighbour almost to Squire Dudley.'

'Indeed, what a delightful person this Squire Dudley must be! And so, because Lord Kemms chances to be near neighbour to Squire Dudley, he allows his name to grace our prospectus? I should not have thought it.'

'Why should you not?' asked Mr Black, sullenly.

'Well, for one reason, because he has been at Vienna for the last four months.'

'I saw him, at any rate, in Squire Dudley's house, when I was down in Hertfordshire last summer,' answered Mr Black.

'And he gave you permission to use his name?'

'Certainly. Do you think I should put it on the direction if he had not?' asked Mr Black.

'Have you any letter from him to that effect—any written authority to do so?'

'Even in the City we think a man's word sufficient authority,' was the reply. 'I do not know what code of honour may be observed among your relations, Mr Stewart.'

'It is best not to depend too much on honour,' answered that gentleman, coolly. 'If Lord Kemms took it into his head, on his return home, to repudiate the transaction, do you know what would be the result?'

'Our company would probably find itself in Queer Street,' re-

plied Mr Black ; 'but I am not afraid of that. Kord Kemms is not a man to back out of a promise, particularly if it can be made worth his while to keep it,' added the promoter, *sotto voce*.

'I did not quite catch the last portion of your sentence,' remarked Mr Stewart.

'It was of no consequence—merely a passing reflection,' said Mr Black. 'I can show you Mr Hope's authority, and that of your nephew, Mr Croft, if the sight would afford you any gratification.'

'Thank you—they are of no consequence,' was the reply. 'I should have liked to see Lord Kemms', because, from "information I have received," I did not think his lordship would join us.'

'He would not have joined us had Mr Raidsford's persuasion carried much weight.'

'Indeed ! Who is Mr Raidsford—his confessor ?'

'Come, come, Mr Stewart, do you think I am quite a simpleton ?' demanded Mr Black. 'Do you imagine that piece of acting can take me in ? I know who has been setting you against me—I know who has been putting you up to ask if names are genuine—if permission to use them has really been given. You have not so long left Mr Raidsford's office as to have forgotten who and what he is ; and I know who and what he is—a sneak and a toady, who has worked himself up from nothing with a smooth tongue and a spying nature. It was through tale-bearing he got on—perhaps it will be through tale-bearing he may get down.'

'He is rich, then ?'—this was interrogative.

'Mr Stewart,' said the promoter, desperately, 'don't you know all about Compton Raidsford, as well as I know about you ? Don't you know he is very rich—so rich that he would not touch shares in the Bank of England ? Don't you know he hates all companies—that having grubbed his own way up, he believes anybody else can grub up unassisted also ? Don't you know he is a prying, meddling, conceited, cursed upstart ?' finished Mr Black.

'I cannot say that I do—in fact, I cannot say that I know the man at all,' answered Mr Stewart.

'Well, you need not say, but I may think,' snapped up Mr Black ; 'and, with regard to the question you put to me some time

since, all I have got to remark is this—I will work with you, and for you and myself, if you will let me ; but there is a limit to all things. I cannot stand being bullied and interfered with. Let me work the company my own way, and I will take what amount of advice you choose to give, and act on it if I can. I am a good servant, if I am let alone—interfere with this, that, and the other and I am apt to turn restive. If you take the right way with me, you will not find me unreasonable ; but I tell you fairly to begin with, that though a child might lead, the devil himself should not drive me.’

‘I must advertise for an intelligent three-year-old, then,’ laughed Mr Stewart, ‘for I shall certainly not attempt driving you. Only, I mean to have my way in some things, remember. I am a little like you, Mr Black—averse to being crossed ; so it will be better for us to agree to go the same road, rather than always be pulling contrary ways. You will bear in mind what I said about our company being made a refuge, and not repeat such a mistake. I shall look in again after Christmas ; meantime, allow me to wish you the compliments of the season.’

‘Thank you ; same to you, sir,’ answered Mr Black, forced to accept the civility, but by no means mollified by it.

‘I hope the new year may prove a prosperous one to us all,’ said Mr Stewart, meditatively, looking into his hat.

‘I hope so too,’ the promoter agreed ; ‘it shall not be for want of any exertions on my part if the company fail.’

‘Fail,’ repeated Mr Stewart ; ‘fail ! it shall not fail ! Conducted with ordinary prudence, it should be a perfect mine of wealth. There is scarcely a public bakery in England which has not paid the most enormous dividends ; and what is the field in any county or provincial town in comparison to that which is open for us in London ? Three millions of bread-eaters, and not a large bakery to supply them !’

‘You may remember that I made a somewhat similar observation in the prospectus,’ remarked Mr Black, not sorry to have an opportunity of indirectly accusing Mr Stewart of plagiarism.

‘Did you ? How very singular ! Is it copyright ? If so, I will not infringe again. And that reminds me, what induces you to

stick the Mount Cashell motto at the head of each advertisement.'

'I suppose the motto was in existence before the Mount Cashells were thought of,' retorted Mr Black. 'It is none the worse for their having used it, is it?'

'It is none the better,' was the reply; 'still,' went on Mr Stewart, 'the prospectus, as a whole, does you credit. It is very moderate in its tone—a great matter in these days of bounce and swagger; and that allusion to the "Give us bread and the games" is rather neat. I like the stamp motto also, "Sweet and wholesome." Altogether, that Latin of yours is a good idea.'

'The idea was mine, but not the Latin,' answered Mr Black, frankly. 'I do not pretend to be much of a scholar myself; I had something else to do when I was young than pore over any book, unless, indeed, it might be a day-book; but I know even the appearance of learning has an effect on the general public, and so I begged Dudley to look me up one or two appropriate quotations. He is a gentleman, you know—been to college, and all that sort of thing.'

'They do not sell brains at college, it appears, however, though they may learning,' remarked Mr Stewart, drily; after which speech, intended, evidently, as a delicate compliment to Arthur Dudley's understanding, the great director put his hat on his head, and said 'Good afternoon' to Mr Black, and, walking out of the office, took his way westward through Cloak and Trinity Lanes, thinking as he went, 'That is a sharp, clever fellow. Now I wonder if he can and will be honest, even to answer his own purpose.'

Meanwhile, the subject of this speculation stood shaking his clenched fist after Mr Stewart.

'I wish to God I dare have kicked the old humbug up Cannon-street,' he said in his rage, quite out loud. 'I should not mind paying a hundred pounds to have the pleasure of telling the cursed upstart that I don't care a damn for him, or his connection, or his standing, or anything about him. Here have I had all the trouble, all the anxiety, all the work, while my gentleman was amusing himself doing the grand in foreign countries; and then, when I, after having stood the racket, began to hope the rest would be

smooth sailing, down he comes with his capital, and sweeps away all chance of profit. Capital, indeed ; damn capital, say I !'

Thus the man whose life had been one long struggle to gain capital, who was never weary of writing prospectus after prospectus in order to prove that without capital nothing good or great ever had been, or ever would be, accomplished ; the ostensible object of whose existence it was to demonstrate that individual exertion was useless ; that it was only the united wealth of a number of individuals which could hope to effect large results ; the actual end of whose labours—could those labours have been carried out according to the programme he had arranged—was to exterminate all small tradesmen, all struggling merchants—almost unconsciously paraphrased the sense of Mr Raidsford's lamentation.

Great wits and little wits, we are assured, oftentimes jump together, and on this occasion, certainly, the man of large resources and the man of none expressed nearly identical opinions.

'The concentration of capital will be the ruin of England,' said Mr Raidsford, who felt how such a concentration might have neutralized his own efforts to rise in the world.

'Damn capital !' said Mr Black, smarting under Mr Stewart's insolence ; 'it is capital, and nothing but capital, which enables these fellows to give themselves such airs.'

'But the game is not finished yet,' added the promoter, next instant ; 'when it is, Mr Stewart, you will perhaps find out to your cost which of us rises the winner.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOLLY BERRIES.

THE accident at Berrie Down brought, during the course of a few weeks preceding Christmas, an unprecedented number of visitors to the Hollow. Never before in the memory of any individual connected with the establishment had so many carriages driven up

to the door in the course of one day as was the case when once news of Lally's precarious state came to be bruited abroad.

People who had never called on Mrs Dudley now called to inquire after her child, and there had to be a piece of cork fastened under the knocker, and some baize tied round the clapper of the bell, in order to prevent Heather being maddened by the incessant rat-tat-tat and ting-ting-ting of her neighbours' grand footmen.

Very little social courtesy had been extended to Mrs Dudley since her marriage. Long before her advent, the Dudleys had dropped off the visiting lists of their more aristocratic acquaintances, and no one felt much inclined to take steps towards reviving the old intimacy when Arthur Dudley brought home to the Hollow a wife of whom no one knew anything, who might, in fact, be 'anybody'—as Mrs Poole Seymour, the great lady of North Kemms, vaguely expressed herself.

When society does not take notice of a woman on the occasion of her marriage, it is difficult for any member composing it subsequently to repair that omission; and thus, although there was scarcely a lady in the three parishes who would not willingly enough have extended her countenance to Mrs Dudley, and although most persons' consciences pricked them when they passed the Hollow, or met the pretty woman and her children, and the brothers and sisters-in-law whom she had so speedily tamed and civilized, in Berrie Down Lane, still Heather's circle of acquaintances had remained extremely limited, and might have remained so for many a year longer, had not Lally's accident broken the conventional ice, and brought, as I have said, visitors and kind inquiries to Berrie Down in abundance.

The excitement produced by the little girl's illness and danger was, indeed, something astonishing. Mothers had a fellow-feeling for the poor creature who sat—so the doctor reported—day and night by her little girl's side. Those who were childless had perhaps even a keener, because a more imaginative and sentimental, sympathy in the matter. Gentlemen, as a rule, admired Heather, and regretted that any trouble should fall upon her; and, added to all these causes of compassion, there was a strong feeling in the small community round about Berrie Down that Mrs Dudley was

a victim—an unappreciated victim, moreover; that she must have had a hard time of it with those boys and girls, and that ‘proud, useless husband,’ and that it was quite time somebody took her up and made her position more endurable.

The world’s pity is usually abundant in inverse proportion to the necessity that exists for it to be vouchsafed at all.

Certainly, Heather did not consider the five brothers and sisters a cause for repining, nor had she ever murmured because she and her husband often found it a hard struggle to make the two ends of their income meet.

If, of late, she had occasionally wept over any paragraph in her life’s story, those tears were never shed in public—of their bitterness she never complained to any created being.

Her happiness the world could not mar, her grief the world could not cure; and, perhaps for both these reasons, and also because she felt that society was by no means an inexpensive luxury, she did not respond to the advances now made with so much alacrity as the ladies of the three parishes thought she might have done under the circumstances.

‘Under the circumstances’ meant, that, although they—the ladies—had neglected Mrs Dudley at first, still they had availed themselves of the earliest opportunity which offered of making amends to her for their former want of attention.

They were willing to forget all the years during which the Dudleys had involuntarily put themselves on one side, if the Dudleys would forget those years likewise; but Heather did not, as has been stated, appear unduly elated by the somewhat tardy honour which was now sought to be thrust upon her. It was not in her nature to be unthankful or ungracious; but her mind was troubled about her child, she said, and she trusted visitors would excuse her coming down to them.

Thus Bessie Ormson and Agnes Dudley were in the habit of repulsing great ladies day after day; but, somehow, the autocrats of their various ilks did not take these apologetic messengers in bad part,—rather, on the contrary, they professed their anxiety that poor dear Mrs Dudley should not leave her little girl, and appeared

quite content to hear the story of the accident from the lips of other members of Squire Dudley's family.

Hitherto, most decidedly, the younger Dudleys had been rather a trouble to the minds of those exalted persons who occasionally deigned to discuss Berrie Down Hollow and the persons who dwelt there.

They were regarded as a species of fungus which had been permitted to grow upon and disfigure a very old and a very good tree. Grandchildren were they of an alderman—a poor alderman, be it remembered, who had not even thought it worth his while to recognize the honour birth had conferred on him and his, by leaving a sufficient amount of money behind to patch up the broken fortunes of the Dudleys of Berrie Down.

If trade were to be tolerated at all, it could only be tolerated for the sake of the wealth it brought to aristocratic but empty coffers.

In itself, like a servant, it was an evil ; but like a servant also, if it did its work, its presence might be both tolerated and approved.

If it failed to perform its appointed task—if it grew poor and pretentious, like its betters, then the sooner it was stamped out the better.

A poor alderman seemed in the eyes of those great people nothing more nor less than an arrant impostor. Of course, any gentleman marrying the daughter of such a person would conclude she had money, and for her not to have money was a downright deception.

Then for her to have five children. 'Those kind of vulgar women always have tribes of children, my dear,' said Mrs Poole Seymour, who was childless, to the Honourable Augusta Baldwin (Lord Kemms' aunt), who was popularly supposed never to have had an offer. 'If poor Major Dudley had lived much longer, there is no telling how many sons and daughters might have been left for his heir to support. Shocking I call it. You remember, the first wife had only one child, and this present Mrs Dudley but two. Quite enough, to my mind—just a nice number ; but as for those five other creatures, it is perfectly heart-breaking to think of any man being burdened with them.'

This was the bird's-eye view of the question which society from an exalted position was good enough to take.

When, however, society condescended to a nearer inspection, affairs assumed a somewhat different aspect. The Dudley girls were not uncouth young women, with large bones, rough hair, loud voices, and red hands ; rather they were, to borrow from Mrs Poole Seymour once more, decidedly pleasing girls—very nice and unaffected in their manners, and irreproachable as to their accent. Altogether, a call at Berrie Down grew to be considered an agreeable object for a morning drive. The ladies of the three parishes were, perhaps, a trifle weary of each other, and liked, moreover, having something to do.

Fruit and flowers, game, picture-books, dolls, toys, came daily to the Hollow, together with compliments and kind inquiries. Callers arrived also, assured that some day Heather herself would become visible, and also very certain that half an hour at Berrie Down passed more rapidly than ten minutes anywhere else.

Bessie did her best to amuse the great people, and the great people were pleased to approve her efforts. 'You and your sisters really must come over and stay with me,' Mrs Poole Seymour was good enough at last to declare ; and then Bessie had to explain she was not a Miss Dudley at all,—only a cousin wishful to help Mrs Dudley at that trying period. A 'sort of nurse,' added Bessie, mischievously, whereupon Agnes Dudley observed, 'A very pearl of nurses ; I do not know what we should have done without her ;' at which little speech Mrs Poole Seymour smiled graciously, and said they were good, sweet girls, of whom she trusted she should yet have the pleasure of seeing a great deal.

'She has all the trust and all the pleasure on her side, then,' remarked Bessie, after their visitors departed ; but, in spite of this depreciating observation, there can be no question but that Miss Ormson liked playing hostess—that she delighted in trying her strength and testing her power on grand ladies who were to the manner born, and never seemed disturbed or put out by any circumstance, or any person.

Another thing pleased her also—the vain coquettish puss—namely, to run up to her room after the various callers had de-

parted, and looking in the glass consider how much prettier—how much more graceful—she was than any of them.

Mrs Compton Raidsford was amongst the earliest of Mrs Dudley's visitors. No one, not even the Earl's daughter, who married Mr Plimpton, of Thornfield—a man commonly believed to be rolling in wealth—came in such style to Berrie Down as the contractor's wife.

She had the shortest distance to drive of any lady in the neighbourhood, yet she arrived in a great chariot drawn by a pair of horses, seventeen hands high if they were an inch, with coachman and footman on the box, and another footman behind.

As Bessie subsequently remarked, 'Anybody might have thought the Lord Mayor of London had come out in his state carriage to visit us. I really felt quite subdued by such unnecessary magnificence.'

'And if you only saw Mrs Raidsford, Heather,' she went on; 'if you could only imagine the mass of satin, and velvet, and sable, and pretension and vulgarity, which descended, assisted by two footmen, from that chariot, you would be astonished to think Mr Raidsford has lived with her so long. I never did behold such a woman. I dare not look at Agnes while she was talking. Do you think I could at first imagine whom she meant by 'your gentleman,' or conceive why she wanted to know what sized nursery you had? I consider it was most clever of Agnes to interrupt me when I was going to say I could get a rule from Cuthbert and measure it for her. How came you to guess, Aggy, that was her way of inquiring how many children Heather had? She said she hoped you would not think she had condescended in coming over so soon—'

'What!' exclaimed Heather in astonishment.

'She meant intruded, I believe,' explained Bessie, 'for that Mr Raidsford had never given her a moment's peace about calling ever since he heard of the collusion your little girl had met with. I may safely say,' proceeded Bessie, 'that she did not use a single long word in its right sense. She informed us—talking of ghosts, that she was not supercilious—that if we would come over to Moorlands any day she would be very glad to show us the apiary Mr R. had built for British birds; that her young ladies were not

much of ones for pedestrian exercise, that they preferred walking to riding, only their 'papar' thought it was well for them to be learned how to do it. She told us her nerves never would have been strong enough for her to do anything in that way; in fact, it always put her heart in her mouth to see Lord Kemms a leaping of that Black Knight of his over the fossil on the lawn. If she mentioned Lord Kemms once during the time she was here,' went on Bessie, 'she did sixty times. That is the worst of a man rising; he has to carry his wife a dead weight up with him. Well, there must be some of her to be some of all sorts—so let us rest and be thankful.'

Utterly astonished was Arthur at sight of the visitors who came to inquire concerning the health of his eldest-born.

'Leonard might have broken every bone in his body before they would have offered any such civility,' he grumbled; but Bessie bade him 'hush—sh—sh—'

'It was really your good child Leonard, Arthur, who pushed her in,' she said; 'and if we have been wise enough to keep that fact in the background, I pray you not to be ungrateful. It was poor Heather's sinner who fell into the water, but it was your saint who was the cause of her doing so. And it is natural such a catastrophe should bring wives and mothers to Berrie Down. It brought me, so you ought not to be surprised at anything after that.'

'It was very kind of you, Bessie,' answered Squire Dudley; but, nevertheless, he refused to see their visitors, and it was long before the honours of Berrie Down were done by Heather in person.

Then, indeed, Mrs Poole Seymour, and the Honourable Augusta Baldwin, Mrs Plimpton, and Mrs Carroll, and Mrs Raidsford, and Mrs Lynford, and Mrs Hulst, and a multitude of other morning callers, professed themselves charmed, and wondered how it happened they could have resided for so long a time within visiting distance of Berrie Down without knowing that dear, sweet, gentle Mrs Dudley.

'Anything prettier than Mrs Dudley and her little girl,' opined society, 'had never been exhibited at the Royal Academy;' and certainly, in those days, both mother and child were very touching

—Heather pathetic, with pale thin face and anxious eyes ; Lally so easily tired, so soon wearied, even with fresh toys and strange faces.

‘Oo dood to Lally,’ she said to Mrs Poole Seymour when that lady bought her a doll’s house furnished complete, and would have had the child play with and enjoy it ; ‘oo dood to Lally, but Lally tired, mamma—tell lady—Lally’s very bad.’

There was not a woman who went up in due time to the room where Lally lay that left it with dry eyes. Even Mrs Raidsford declared the scene was ‘quite effective.’ As for Mrs Poole Seymour, she was never weary of bringing over toys for the child, which the poor little creature always clutched with weak avidity, and then next moment almost wearily relinquished.

There were two spirits in poor Lally then ; the spirit of health and the spirit of sickness, the spirit of her former self, and the spirit which entered into her body as she rose for the last time struggling for life in the cold waters of Mr Scrotter’s pond. The first was all eagerness, excitement, vivacity ; the last was languid, weary, inactive ; the first hastened her pulses, sent the blood to her cheeks, loaded her tongue with eager words, and tipped her fingers with quicksilver ; the second laid a depressing weight on her heart, caused the unspoken words to die away on her white lips, drew the bright colour from her face, checked the impulses of the little hand, and caused the tired head to be laid on her mother’s breast almost before the new toys were examined—the latest wonder in doll creation critically inspected.

‘Put ’em away,’ she was wont to say with the air of a matron of forty, ‘put ’em away, Lally look at ’em by-and-by.’

But by-and-by came and went,—came and went without bringing much more inclination to Lally to inspect her new possessions.

The loveliest doll on earth could not have retained her attention very long in the days of which I am writing. She would look at it for a moment and then turn her eyes wearily away. ‘Lally not well,’ that was the burden of the song then ; ‘Ma,—Lally not well.

‘But you are better, my pet,’ Heather was wont to say. ‘You are not very bad now, Lally.’

'No, but Lally not well ;' and then mother and doctor and friends would look at each other and declare 'she is much better, and the spring will do wonders for her.'

Of that spring and of the summer Lally might have been said to rave. Each morning, when she opened her eyes, she would ask between sleeping and waking, 'Bessie, are the leaves come yet?' or 'are the trees green? Is it spring now?'

'Nonsense, puss,' Bessie always answered, 'Christmas has not come yet ; you are to get well, you know, and be carried downstairs to eat your plum-pudding. Little girls who sham sickness are not to have any good things at all. You are to be taken into the drawing-room and kissed under the misletoe—kissed till you are black and blue, you bad child, for all the trouble and anxiety you have caused us.'

Whereupon Lally would declare she 'wadn't bad tild, and she wouldn't be tised back and bue ; Lally has had more tisses than ze liked these days ; Lally tired of ladies tissing of her.'

'You little ungrateful monkey !'

'Big fat ooman tised Lally, and hurt her with her beard,' the child complained, 'and Lally did not like her sweet-sweets ; they were nasty.'

'You ought not to have had any, you know, you dreadful child !'

'Lally ought ; Lally would like some this minute, if they was dood, and not mortar. Issy said they were mortar, and that Mrs Aidsford had no business to bring them : but Issy says wicked things, and Lally isn't to 'tend to her.'

Having finished which speech, Lilian Dudley nestled her head in her pillow, and thought over her various visitors.

'I'd like to have Muff,' she said at last, as a consolatory conclusion ; and, accordingly, Muff was brought ; and from that day forth the cat rarely left its little mistress's side. By some mysterious means, the creature seemed to understand there was a terrible fight going on in the silent room, and it would lie for hours quietly beside the child, purring vigorously, never moving, unless Lally said, tenderly, 'poor titty,' or 'poor puss,' in which case it would open its eyes and blink at her gratefully, or else march backwards

and forwards over her breast, rubbing sides, and head, and tail against the pinched, changed face of the little child.

There was nothing much sadder, in those days, than the contemplation of Lally and 'pussens,' as she styled her cat.

There was the meek, unassuming, yet intense sympathy of the dumb creature, not unmixed, it might be, with a perfect appreciation of the physical comforts which Lally's illness provided for her. There was, on the other hand, the irritable and unreasonable affection of the higher creature—the exacting fondness of a mistress who expected Muff continually to get up out of her sleep, to rub against and make much of her.

Which Muff did—greatly to her credit, as I consider.

A dozen times in an hour the cat was roused from her slumber, with invariably the same result; and, sleepy or not sleepy, she was always expected, if Lally wished that she should do so, to fold her paws, lie quiet, put down her head, commence purring, and so wander into dreamland once again.

'Poor pussens, poor tittens, poor Muff!' and so mistress and cat would fall to rest, mutually caressing each other; and sometimes Bessie, watching the pair, would turn her head aside and cry silently.

They were gathering holly berries in those days; and Lally had longed to go out and watch the holly being cut 'in Berrie Down Lane, and just round about, ma,' she said; but in this matter Heather was firm. 'My pet must not put her little face outside the doors till spring comes,' she answered; and then Lally very piteously asked, 'Will spring be long, ma,—will spring be long?'

'Look at the beautiful dress I have made for Lally's own self,' said Bessie on Christmas-eve—holding up a little frock of white cashmere, which she had bound and trimmed, and decked out prettily with light blue ribbon. 'My child is to be dressed up in all this loveliness to-night, and carried down in Bessie's arms, to say to mamma and papa 'merry Christmas, happy new year.' Lally won't be awake soon enough in the morning to say all that long sentence. Would Lally like to be dressed, and go now?'

Lally conceiving that she would, the grand dress was slipped on

over her little night-gown, then a soft blue shawl was thrown round her neck, and thus attired, with her head resting on Bessie's shoulder, Lally put in her first appearance in the family circle.

'My darling, my darling!' Heather said; and she stood up white and trembling as she spoke.

'Is that my little girl?' Arthur exclaimed, making a movement to take her, in which he was restrained, however, by Lally's statement that she was not to be hurt. 'Lally's been very sore, pa,' she explained. 'Merry Chris-mes, dood new year!'

'That is not it,' whispered Bessie, giving her a little admonitory shake,—'happy.'

'Ma, happy Chris-mes, merry new year!' and the little creature made the round of the family, not forgetting Master Marsden, whom Bessie reluctantly allowed to kiss her. Surreptitiously and remorsefully that young gentleman conveyed into Lally's hand five or six marbles, which had been secreted about his person.

'They are for you,' he whispered; and the gift Lally religiously carried up-stairs, falling asleep with the precious stones laid in a heap beside her.

'Ver pret,' she said pointing to the great branch of holly, with its red berries glowing among the glossy leaves, which Bessie had suspended over the top of her little bed, 'ver-pret.'

'Yes, my darling, they are ver-ver pret,' answered Bessie, while she took off Lally's finery, and laid her down among the snowy napery; and when all that was done, and Lally was tucked up for the night, Bessie took her seat beside the bed, and told the child, as well as she could, what event the holly berries were hung there to commemorate; told her how, more than eighteen centuries before, the wise men came to worship at Bethlehem, and how the star had gone before them, and stood over the manger where Jesus was laid.

'That is why we hang our houses with holly branches, Lally,' Bessie went on, 'because to-morrow is the birthday of One who loved us all exceedingly. Do you understand me, pet?'

'Iss,' was the reply, 'Lally does; Lally heard all that before long ago, that is why we have plum-pudden too.'

Rather disheartened at this view of the question, Bessie observed,

that when people were glad they prepare a feast, and 'make merry,' and that plum-pudding happened to be part of the good things provided at Christmas.

'Did He have dood tings?' Lally immediately inquired, with the terrible perception of the incongruous, which makes it so difficult to talk to children on serious subjects in connection with their daily life.

Altogether, it seemed to Bessie that she had better have left her religious instruction alone; but she had gone too far to recede, and accordingly she answered that 'He had been poorly lodged, poorly fed, evilly treated while He remained on earth; that though He had done so much for men, men had used Him despitefully, and mocked and forsaken Him. But He loved little children, Lally,' finished Bessie, 'and so, when you look at the holly berries, you must always think of Him. He was so good, Lally, that Child born eighteen hundred years ago. He was so good!'

'Are you dood, Bessie?' asked the little creature.

'No, my darling, I am not; I wish I were; oh! Lally, I wish I were!'

'You are dood to Lally,' was the encouraging reply. 'Bessie, I do love 'oo; thing to I, please; thing I to thleep.'

But Bessie refused to sing at all till Lally said 'sleep' properly.

'Seep dere den,' Lally exclaimed in a tone of such triumph that Bessie was fain to kiss her a dozen times ere commencing one of those dear old Christmas carols that one never hears now-a-days, that went out of fashion with the Christmas frosts and snows.

By the time the strain was ended, Lally had fallen asleep; but through the night she wakened and asked Agnes, who sat beside her bed, to tell her more about the Child.

'What child, dear?' said Agnes, who thought she was dreaming or wandering.

'It is His birthday, you know; the Child;' and then Agnes knew what she meant, and told her stories about Him and His goodness till Lally said plaintively, 'I wis He was here now, Aggy.'

'I wish He were, my darling, for He would make you better in a moment,' Agnes answered, sorrowfully.

‘Agnes!’—it was Heather coming into the room with a loose dressing-gown thrown around her that made Agnes turn at this point,—‘He is here, and He will make my child well, if it seemeth Him good. I prayed for her all the time she was so very ill, as it would have been impossible for me to have prayed, had I not felt He was with me, standing near; but I tried not to pray too much, dear, lest in granting my petition He should punish me for it.’

And so mother and aunt talked while the child dropped off into slumber once again, and so the Christmas morning dawned—fine, and clear, and bright; and the holly berries looked red and warm as the December sun peered through the windows of the Hollow, and found everything there in due order for a quiet, happy Christmas.

The child was not well, but she was out of danger, and Heather felt she must that day go to church and thank God for delivering her darling from the lions—for giving her back from the very jaws of death, to life and hope, to parents and friends.

CHAPTER XIX.

GONE.

It was a lovely morning, and every one was going to walk over to Fifield church except Laura, who had almost tearfully entreated to be left in charge of Lally.

‘I love her as much as any of you,’ she said, ‘and still I have the least to do with her.’

So it was settled that Laura should remain at home, and all the rest proceed along Berrie Down Lane, up which we walked slowly and lingeringly in the first chapter in this book—to Fifield.

A large party—for, although the intended festivities had been given up, and no visitors were invited to Berrie Down Hollow, still, the Dudleys themselves made a goodly number—eight, including Bessie—who looked pale and tired when she came into the

drawing-room, 'dressed in all her best ;' so shrieked Harry Marsden—and ready to go to church.

'Mayn't I go to?' asked that young gentleman, pulling at Heather's dress ; 'I'd like the walk as well as anybody.'

'Do you think it is only for the sake of the walk we are going to church, Harry?' asked Agnes, virtuously drawing on her gloves as she spoke.

'How should I know ? Bessie's likely going for the sake of the young men ; that's what pa says takes all girls to church,' answered the *enfant terrible*.

'Well, I daresay Mrs Dudley will not object to your seeing whether that is what we go for,' said Bessie. 'I will brush your hair and put you to rights, for you are a perfect scarecrow now.'

And thus it was settled Master Marsden should accompany the party ; and Alick, home for Christmas, had not a chance given him of looking at Bessie to see how she took Harry's remark about the object for which young ladies went to church.

'What had taken her to North Kemms,' he wondered ; 'whom could the man be whom they had met there ? what his connection with Bessie ?'

These questions Alick stood striving vainly to answer, while Master Marsden was being brushed and made look respectable by Bessie Ormson.

'I am as good as a mother to you, Harry,' she said.

'I am sure you are ; but that's not saying much,' answered the boy. 'Mine has always a headache, and is constantly telling us not to make a noise. Noise, indeed ! Women can make enough noise themselves, when they want to.'

'Do not say "want to," Harry, it is vulgar.'

'No more vulgar than you are,' he replied. 'I shall talk as I like. What is good enough for pa ought to be good enough for you.'

'It is a fortunate thing for both of us that I am not your pa, as you call him,' Bessie answered, 'for I should shake you to death some day. Now, are you ready, or are you going to keep us waiting all day?'

'You think you look so nice in that bonnet,' Harry sneered,

'that you want to be off like a flash of lightning. You are none so pretty, some people think, though Harcourt, as my papa says, does imagine there is nobody like you. Pa says he would not marry you. I heard pa tell ma so, not a week before I came here.'

'I can't wonder at that,' Bessie replied; 'your papa probably finds he has married one too many of the family already.'

But this side-stroke Master Marsden seemed unable perfectly to understand; wherefore he asked Bessie what she meant; in reply to which question he received the information that 'children should not ask too many questions; and that, if he intended going with them to Fifield church, it was time he got his cap and went down-stairs.'

In acknowledgment of all this instruction, Harry, pulling a face at Bessie, that young lady forthwith unceremoniously marched him off and gave him in charge of Cuthbert, who grumbled a little over the trust.

Human nature is much the same on Christmas as on any other day in the week, and every creature in Berrie Down—Heather herself not excepted—felt Harry Marsden to be a burden and a tax.

Never before—never, Heather thought, had Berrie Down Lane looked so lovely as it did on that morning when they all paced it side by side. She had not been out for weeks previously, and the very branches of the trees seemed to bend and greet her as she passed.

There were few leaves, and there were no wild flowers, yet the banks and hedgerows looked warm and pleasant, the ivy was trailing over the sward and twining fresh and green round the roots of the elms and beeches; the spruce laurel put forth its glossy foliage between the bare boughs of the thorn, and its bluish-black berries formed a contrast to those of the holly, red and glowing in the sunshine.

Everything looked fair and lovely to Heather on that Christmas morning. Arthur had been so kind to her for weeks past, had never grumbled about Lally's illness, nor complained concerning the child having occupied too much of her time and thoughts.

Alick was back amongst them—not much changed by his sojourn in town—good, and considerate, and helpful as ever. He

talked hopefully of a vacant situation in Messrs Elser's office, which he thought Cuthbert might fill ; and Heather's secret desire for many a day previously had been that when Cuthbert went forth into the world it might be under Alick's auspices.

She did not feel quite so certain of the one boy as of the other ; she did not think that as Cuthbert grew up she could manage him without Alick's aid. He was more uncertain in his temper, less to be depended on in any way, weaker for good, stronger for evil, than his brother. Altogether, Heather desired that Alick should have the supervision of him ; and, behold, there was already a chance of the desire being gratified.

Then Lally was better ; though not yet strong, she was certainly better, and the girls were well ; even Bessie made no complaint, though Heather thought she looked a trifle pale in her pretty bonnet, made of violet velvet, which was about the most becoming colour and material possible to the complexion of that young belle, Miss Ormson.

'What a shame, dear, that Gilbert is not with us,' Heather had laughingly said the same morning, standing under the misletoe. 'Let me kiss you for him.'

'Kiss me for yourself, Heather,' Bessie answered, colouring up to her very temples, 'but not for him.'

'And why not for him?' asked Heather.

'I will tell you to-morrow, not to-day,' was the reply. 'To-morrow, perhaps.'

And then, irresistibly, there came back to Heather's mind that passage in 'Elizabeth, or the Exiles of Siberia,' where Elizabeth, repeating the word 'to-morrow,' sighs.

'You look pale, Bessie,' Heather remarked, when they had almost reached the foot of Berrie Down Lane. 'Are you getting tired, dear?'

'I do not feel very well,' Bessie answered ; 'I think I will go back again, if you have no objection.'

Immediately, every one offered to return with her, even Harry Marsden, who, being debarred from throwing stones at the birds, was beginning to feel weary of the walk.

'I do not mind going to church.' 'Let me walk back with you.'

'No, I will go.' 'No, you have not been out for ever so long.'
'Let me'—'me'—'me.'

All of which polite offers Bessie declined, saying, if, any one insisted on returning with her, she should walk on to church.

'I am not ill,' she finished, 'I am only tired; when I get home, I shall lie down and be as bright by the time you come back as any of you. Good-bye,—*au revoir!*'—and with that she kissed her hand, and commenced slowly retracing her steps—Heather turning every now and then to watch her progress.

The farther the distance between them became the silenter grew Heather. She felt a nameless anxiety about Bessie,—an anxiety which she could neither conquer nor analyze, but which, nevertheless, increased until when, almost within sight of Fifield church, she remarked to her husband that she really thought she must return home also.

'I am uneasy about Bessie,' she said; 'the girl certainly did not look well.'

'Pooh!' exclaimed Arthur, 'she is only a little tired. It would vex her if you went home now; I should not think of doing such a thing, I really should not, Heather.'

And so Heather was persuaded not to follow after Bessie, but go on to church.

'You will find her well enough on our return,' remarked Arthur; and his prophecy proved correct, for Bessie met them at the gate looking bright and happy, and with as rich a colour as she had ever boasted mantling in her cheeks.

'Hollo! you've been painting,' cried out Master Marsden. 'Hasn't she, Alick? nobody's face was ever like that without paint.'

'Harry, I really shall have to write to your mamma if you make such rude remarks,' said Heather rebukingly. 'And so,' she added, addressing Bessie, 'you do feel quite well again? I felt so uneasy after you left us that I should have turned had it not been for Arthur's remonstrance.'

'I am glad he did remonstrate,' answered Bessie, 'it would have been a real grief to me if you had come home on my account. I felt a little tired, that was all, and I am quite rested now.'

So, indeed, it seemed, for never had Bessie been so gay as on

that Christmas afternoon. And she was very sweet too, as well as gay ; she uttered no sharp speeches ; she was ready to play at cat's-cradle with Leonard, and even refrained from scolding when Harry Marsden, who must needs take a hand in that scientific game also, tore her lace sleeve to shreds.

She made herself agreeable to Arthur likewise, talking to him, while Heather was up-stairs, concerning London, and her father's business, and her father's anxieties, and the Squire's own prospects, as quietly and sensibly, her cousin subsequently declared, as her mother might have done.

'And I think, Heather, she must be very fond of her father,' Arthur informed his wife ; 'for once when she was speaking about him, and how hard he worked, and of how little help her brothers were to him, her voice quite shook, and the tears came into her eyes. I had not given Bessie credit for so much feeling.'

'She is a dear, sweet girl,' Heather answered. 'I am glad she did not insist, as I feared she might, on sitting up with Lally. She is completely worn out, I think. Did you notice how pale she turned when she was bidding us good-night ?'

Other people beside Heather had observed this pallor. Mrs Piggott, who, making a grievous complaint concerning Priscilla Dobbin's shortcomings and habit of always being out of the way when wanted, was silenced by the sight of Bessie's wan face, and by Bessie's entreaty for her not to be hard on Priscilla.

'She was with me a long time, you know, Mrs Piggott, to-day,' she said ; 'I did not feel very well when I returned this morning, and Prissy put away my bonnet, and did a few other things for me that I was not inclined to do for myself.'

'There, there, Miss, don't say another word, but go away to bed ; you look like a ghost this minute ; you have been trying to kill yourself lately, that is my opinion ; but, please God, we will all turn round now.'

'Where shall we turn to, Mrs Piggott ?' asked Bessie, with a smile, and then she re-crossed the hall and ascended the stairs to her own room, only pausing for a moment ere she went, to ask Alick if he would take a letter up to town for her on the following morning.

'It is to papa, and he will receive it earlier if you post it in London. Thank you. I will leave it on the hall-table to-night. Good-bye, Alick, good-bye!' and Alick imagined she pressed his hand tighter than ever she had done before, and that there was a very plaintive tone in her voice as she uttered that word, 'Good-bye.'

Later on in the night, when every one except Lucy Dudley, who sat up with Lally, was supposed to be in bed, Bessie stole into the nursery, 'to have another peep at her child,' she said.

'You ought to have been asleep long ago,' Lucy remarked, rebukingly; but Bessie explained she had been writing to her father a very long letter on an important subject, which Alick was going to take to town with him.

'About your marriage?' Lucy inquired, and Bessie answered, 'Yes.'

'If we talk any more we shall waken Lally,' the girl added. 'Good-night, Lucy—good-night, my bad child—my poor little Lally!

And stooping, she put her lips to Lally's hand, which lay outside the coverlet, and kissed it softly. When she lifted her head, Lucy saw that her eyes were full of tears.

'Bessie, Bessie, darling, what is the matter?' she whispered, putting her arms round her cousin's neck, and striving to detain her; but Bessie gently disengaged herself from the embrace, and saying, 'we shall waken Lally; there is nothing the matter with me,' left the room—her face buried in her handkerchief, sobbing, sobbing as she went. Lucy would have followed her, but Bessie motioned her not to do so. Then, gliding noiselessly along the passage, she entered her own room, and Agnes heard the key turned in the lock.

Some hours afterwards, when Heather, as was her custom, came to relieve the watcher, Lucy expressed her fear that Bessie could not be well. 'She cried so bitterly,' the girl explained.

Hearing this, Mrs Dudley went to Bessie's door, and quietly turned the handle.

Contrary to her expectations, the bolt was not drawn inside, and she stepped into the apartment.

In the darkness she stood, holding her breath and listening. Bessie was asleep. Heather heard the regular respiration of what she considered sound slumber, and felt satisfied.

‘I do not imagine she can be ill,’ Mrs Dudley remarked, on her return to Lucy. ‘She is sleeping quietly enough now, at all events. Tell me, dear,’ she added, ‘have you heard any noise at all during the night? I fancied I caught a sound something like footsteps crunching on the gravel, and got up to see. Arthur said it was all my fancy. Did you hear anything?’

‘No,’ Lucy replied, ‘nothing whatever. Bessie was down-stairs again, you know, leaving out that letter for Alick to take to town; but she was very quiet. I do not think you could have heard her.’

‘It was my fancy, I suppose,’ remarked Heather. ‘I have felt restless and nervous all the night long. I was quite glad when four o’clock struck to get up. Now, go to bed, Lucy, or you will feel ill for want of sleep.’

‘No likelihood of that,’ Lucy answered, suppressing a yawn, however, as she spoke, and went off, leaving mother and child alone.

Sitting there quite alone with her little girl, the restlessness of which Heather had complained returned upon her with double force. She tried to read; she fetched her work-basket, and commenced sewing; she went and stood by the window looking out into the darkness, and longed for five o’clock, when there would come some sounds of life about the house. It was a still, cold morning, pitch dark. Not a dog barked—not a leaf stirred. The silence was almost insupportable, and Heather felt it to be so, as she left the window and returned to Lally’s side.

Still, the child slept quietly; and now Heather’s thoughts reverted to Bessie. What could be the matter with the girl? Why had she been crying the previous night? Why did she so persistently ignore Mr Harcourt’s very existence? How did it happen that the time for her marriage seemed no nearer now than it had done in the summer?

That Mr Harcourt was a devoted correspondent, Heather knew by the evidence of her own eyes. Scarcely a morning passed

without the post-bag bringing a long epistle from him to his affianced wife. Bessie's acknowledgments of these epistles were despatched at much longer and more uncertain intervals ; but then Bessie did not profess to be a good correspondent. 'She hated letter-writing and letter-writers,' she openly declared ; so that her negligence in this particular proved nothing. Besides, her time had been much occupied with Lally, and altogether—

As she reached this point in her mental argument, Mrs Dudley heard a sound as though a door were being softly opened and closed at the end of the corridor. With that nervous fear upon her, which seems so often the advance courier of some disaster, the messenger spurring on to tell us of the approach of misfortune, Heather went out into the passage and listened. Yes, there was some one moving stealthily and cautiously in the direction of the back staircase—a woman, for Mrs Dudley could hear the skirt of her dress brushing against the wall as she stole along.

It could not be any of the servants, because they had no business in that part of the house ;—their sleeping-rooms being in the roof, and access to those apartments only possible by means of the back staircase which opened out of the front kitchen.

There was a door of communication, however, between the long south corridor, where the principal bed-chambers were situated, and the other portion of the house ; and this door Heather now heard close softly, as the first had done.

Satisfied that Bessie must be ill and about to seek Mrs Pig-gott's apartment, Heather hurried after ; but when she came to try to open the door, it resisted all her efforts. As a rule, the key remained on the side next the main staircase. Now, Heather found it had been removed, and the door locked from within. Not knowing what all this could mean, she went back to Lally's room, took a candle, and, descending into the hall, made her way along a passage which led in the direction of the offices. Crossing the front kitchen, she opened the door which led towards the back staircase, and there on the last step stood Priscilla Dobbin.

'What are you doing ? where are you going ?' asked her mistress.

'I was coming down to look at the clock, ma'am,' answered the girl.

'You have just left Miss Ormson's room—is she ill?'

'No, ma'am, not as I know of. She told me last night to go to her room when I got up for a letter for Master Alick to take to town.'

'And where is that letter?' asked Mrs Dudley.

'On the hall table, ma'am, I believe. Miss Bessie left it there herself after she had wrote it.'

'What made you lock the passage-door after you?'

'Miss Bessie told me to, ma'am.'

Heather could not understand the matter at all. She did not believe that there was a sentence of truth in the girl's statement; but what her object might be in speaking falsely she was unable to imagine.

'Miss Ormson is awake, then?' she said, at length.

'Yes, ma'am—leastways she was when I saw her.'

Without another word, Mrs Dudley turned to regain the hall. She wanted to see if the letter were really on the slab, and then she meant to go to Bessie's room and ascertain whether or not Priscilla had spoken falsely.

The whole thing baffled Heather. But for the locking of the door, she should have thought nothing more about the matter; but what object either Bessie or Priscilla could have in thus cutting off immediate communication between the two parts of the house, she was quite unable to divine.

There on the slab lay Bessie's letter—a thick letter, for Heather lifted and held it in her hand for a moment; then she laid it down again, and ascended the front staircase, slowly and thoughtfully.

She had not reached the landing, however, before Priscilla was beside her.

'Ma'am—Mrs Dudley,' began the girl, 'you can turn me out of the house this moment, if you like. I told you a lie about that letter. I did not go to Miss Bessie's room for it. Miss Bessie is gone.'

'Gone!' Heather looked at the girl, and blankly repeated that word after her.

'Yes, ma'am; and there is a letter for you, please, on the toilet-table,' at which point in her confession Prissy began to whimper.

‘Don’t do that,’ said Mrs Dudley, almost angrily. ‘Go on before me to Miss Ormson’s room, and be quiet.’

Thus ordered, Priscilla walked along the passage, and, opening the door of Bessie’s bed-chamber, stood aside to allow Mrs Dudley to enter.

Heather, as she did so, glanced hurriedly round the apartment. There was no disorder, no confusion ; everything looked precisely as it might have done had Bessie been there—only Bessie was not there.

Heather went up to the bed, and put her hand on the sheet. It felt warm, and she turned to Priscilla, saying, interrogatively—

‘She has only just left the house?’

‘She went at one o’clock, ma’am.’

‘Impossible ! I have been in the room myself since four o’clock, and she was sleeping then.’

‘That was me, ma’am ; and I was not asleep. I heard you come in—I never went to sleep all night. I’d have given anything, ma’am, if I might have told you. I never was so miserable in all my life—and poor Miss Bessie, she were a-crying dreadful.’

‘Where is she gone?’

‘I don’t know, ma’am.’

‘Who is she gone with?’

‘That gentleman as is so sweet on her.’

‘You don’t mean Mr Harcourt?’

‘Lor’ ! no, ma’am ; that other what she came back from church to meet yesterday.’

Utterly bewildered, Heather stood in the middle of the room, confounded and almost stupefied.

Had any one come to her and said Bessie was dead, she could not have felt more shocked—more grieved. Under her eyes this thing had been going on—this deception from day to day, and from week to week—and she had never even suspected its existence. Her very servant had been cognisant of it ; this girl, this false, cheating, untruthful Prissy Dobbin, had been persuaded by Bessie to conceal the mischief until it was too late to repair it. And Bessie, too, that bright, gay, affectionate creature, was but a hypo-

erite and a deceiver ! Mrs Dudley felt this to be the last drop in the cup, and, covering her face, wept bitterly.

‘Don’t ’ee, ma’am,’ implored Priscilla, ‘don’t ’ee take on so ! Read what Miss Bessie says, mayhap that ’ill tell you where she’s gone. The gentleman worships the very ground she treads on ; and they would have told you, only something about his father, I don’t rightly know what, prevented them. Miss Bessie prayed and begged him yesterday to let her speak to you. He wanted her, right or wrong, to go off with him then, but she wouldn’t ; she said she wouldn’t spoil your Christmas Day, not for fifty husbands—she did.’

‘You were very fond of Miss Bessie ?’ Mrs Dudley said, inquiringly.

‘Main fond, ma’am,’ answered the girl. ‘I took to her from the day she talked to me in the field, and give I that harf a crown.’

‘Then don’t go chattering about her having gone off with any one, Prissy. If you are fond of her, show your fondness by keeping silence.’

And with that, Mrs Dudley, first bidding Prissy stay with Lally, in case she wakened, went and roused her husband.

‘Arthur,’ she said, ‘Bessie is off—she has eloped. What are we to do ?’

‘Bessie eloped—Bessie off ! Heather, you must be dreaming !’

‘I wish I were,’ answered his wife. ‘Is there any use in trying to follow her, do you think ?’

‘There might be, if we knew where she was gone,’ Arthur replied. ‘What does she say in her letter ?’ he added, noticing the paper in his wife’s hand.

‘She does not give a clue,’ said Heather. ‘She merely states she is gone to be married, and that, whenever her husband allows her, she will write again.’

‘Better call up Alick,’ suggested Arthur ; and, accordingly, Alick was started.

‘They have four hours’ start,’ said the young man, practically, when he had heard Heather’s story, ‘and their plans must have

been well laid. I will follow if you like, but I think it is useless. They are in London by this time.'

'What makes you think they have gone to London?' asked Heather.

'Because it is the only place in which to be lost,' answered the youth. And the three stood and looked at each other for a few moments in utter silence.

A great blow had suddenly fallen on them, and they felt stunned with its force.

That such a thing should have happened there! that they should all have bidden each other good-night, without a suspicion of coming evil—and that this should have come to pass before morning!

Heather was the first to speak.

'And Mr Harcourt, too—what will he say?'

'If he be a wise man, "that he is well rid of her,"' answered Arthur. 'She must be a bad girl—a bad, false girl.'

'But, oh! so good to Lally,' said Heather, deprecatingly; 'and I do not think it was of her own free will she went now—I do not—I believe she was driven to it. Read her letter, Arthur—read how she says she tried to like Mr Harcourt, and how her mother forced her on. If I only knew she were married, I could rest satisfied.'

And so husband and wife talked on, while Alick, standing by, remained resolutely silent.

He would tell nothing about it; he would say nothing concerning the stranger they had met at North Kemms; he would not utterly destroy Heather's faith, and show her that Bessie had been a deceiver from the beginning. His heart was yearning after the girl, but he would not speak a word that could give a clue as to whom she had eloped with.

She had prayed him not to tell Heather, and he would be faithful to his trust. From him Heather never should know how false this girl had been—this girl with the lovely face, and the sweet, winning manners, which had gained her so many friends.

'The matter should be kept quiet;' each attributing different meanings to that expression, agreed as to the expediency of this

course. Arthur said he would go to town with Alick, and take Bessie's letter on to her father.

'Then, Mr Ormson can do whatever he thinks best,' said the Squire; and Heather at once went to see that breakfast was got ready for the brothers before their departure.

'I wonder who the devil she can have picked up,' remarked Squire Dudley, when his wife left the room; 'you never saw anybody hanging about the place, did you, Alick?'

Very truthfully, Alick answered that he had not; but still in his own soul he felt satisfied Bessie had gone off with the stranger, who sat in the same pew with them, and restored Miss Ormson's prayer-book on that Sunday when he and his cousin walked across the fields to North Kemms church, talking as they went.

CHAPTER XX.

MR STEWART'S PROPOSAL.

THE woman who would rule her household well had need to be endowed by Heaven with almost every virtue. She should be quick to perceive and slow to act; not given to rash judgments, nor easily moved to anger. She should be patient and long-suffering. She should remember that she is an absolute autocrat in her small domain, and be merciful accordingly. Her servants are but after all as children, who have no claim to a parent's care and affection. She can take the bread out of their mouths, and, if they have been happy with her, drive them forth from Eden into the cold bleak world which is all before them; she can make or mar their futures; she can be lenient, or she can be harsh. She can be cruel—like the servant who, going out loosed from his lord's presence, seized upon his fellow-servant, crying, 'Pay me that thou owest;' or she can have compassion on their infirmities, remembering that the God of the whole earth has had compassion on her.

She can be hard and exacting, demanding full measure and strict

change ; she can hold the scales steadily, and if there be a feather's weight too little, cast them out ; or she may be merciful as her Father in Heaven is merciful, and be very patient towards those who try her patience, and her temper, and her Christianity daily. She can be the model, managing, worldly mistress, or she may be the mistress which the Lord shall approve when He cometh to His kingdom. She can resolve the whole question into one of work and wage, or she can go further, and strive so to rule herself, and those she has under her, that when the long account comes to be made up—that account between rich and poor, which will never be closed till eternity—the Great Judge shall say she has done her feeble best, that although only one talent was given unto her, it was not buried in the ground, but put out to usury, returning ample interest.

So far, this story has been written in vain, if any reader have failed to comprehend that Heather Dudley was one of those women, 'the eyes of whose maidens turned unto her ;' and it will, therefore, readily be conceived, that although many persons would have incontinently turned Priscilla Dobbin out of the house, and refused to sleep another night under the same roof with such a double-faced, artful little minx, Mrs Dudley felt sorry for the girl and inclined to make allowances.

She had loved Bessie greatly, and she was but young. Her life was all before her, and Heather could not reconcile it to her conscience to mar it at the outset. She had her talk with the girl, during the course of which Prissy was, after the manner of her class, silent, and apparently sulky. Nevertheless, she departed from the audience-chamber red around the nose, watery about her eyes, and generally depressed in her spirits.

She had thought Miss Bessie's elopement a fine thing till 'it came to the bit,' thus she expressed herself ; but when they mutually had that bit between their teeth she did much relish the undertaking.

'She was to take me as her maid, mum,' Priscilla informed Heather ; 'but he would not let her. He said she could send for me afterwards ; but now, ma'am, if you'll let me stay with you, I would rather. I'll never even think about leaving you again.'

This piece of information was imparted some weeks subsequently ; during the course of those weeks nothing had been heard of or from Bessie. Where she was gone, with whom she was gone off, remained as great enigmas to the family at the Hollow, as they did to her friends in town. From Priscilla, indeed, Heather gathered that the cavalier was tall, dark, handsome, and liberal ; but this was but a poor clue with which to start on a search after Bessie, and so no one attempted to follow it.

She had chosen her own course, and her place knew her no more. All in vain, Heather looked for a letter each morning—no letter ever came. All in vain, Lally fretted after Bessie, and stretched out her arms for the pretty cousin who was gone no one knew where. Mr Ormson advertised daily in the *Times* to B—ss—e O——n, without ever receiving a ghost of a reply. Mr Harcourt paid ‘private inquiry fees,’ but still nothing came of all his searching. Mrs Ormson, figuratively, washed her hands of Bessie, and scored her name out of the family Bible—a volume she never opened except upon high and rare occasions ; the poor father watched his opportunity, and wrote the name in again, the first time Mrs Ormson left her keys in the door of the cupboard where she kept this tell-tale volume of dates and ages. Dr Marsden said he had always expected something of the kind, and Heather almost began to hate this strange man who came in as chorus to every misfortune of the family.

‘I knew she never would marry Harcourt,’ affirmed this clever practitioner, the first time he and Mrs Dudley met after the occurrence ; ‘the fellow must have been a fool to believe her.’

‘And why did you not think she would marry him?’ asked Heather, meekly.

‘Oh ! her head was always running on a very different kind of husband to a struggling lawyer ; and I only hope it is a husband she has got, and not a lover, who will be packing her home to be a disgrace and burden to her family some of these fine days.’

‘I should not think Bessie very likely to return to her family, whether she be married or not,’ Heather answered, a little bitterly. She could not help being a trifle short with Dr Marsden, whose

first-born was still at Berrie Down, a very thorn in the flesh of every member composing the household.

Never out of mischief, never still, always teasing, eternally prying about, listening and meddling, even Heather at last declared, if she only had the money to spare, she would rather pay for Harry's education than be tormented with him.

But there was an end coming to all such torments and discomforts—an end which found Heather but poorly prepared for its advent; and the beginning of this end was a visit Arthur received on the 2nd of January, from a tall, thin, grey-haired, hard-featured individual, who sent in his card as—

‘Mr Allan Stewart.’

‘Being at Kemms Park,’ he stated, after the first civilities had been gone through, ‘I thought you would excuse my calling, and talking over a little matter of business with you. It is about that house in Lincoln's Inn Fields; you know, Mr Dudley, we cannot purchase it from you. I am very sorry indeed, but such a thing is quite out of the question.’

‘Why?’ Arthur demanded.

‘Well, in the first place, the position is anything but desirable; and, in the second, the price you ask is prohibitory. Besides, what do we want with purchasing properties? we need only rent offices. It would be the merest waste of money for us to do otherwise.’

‘Mr Black assured me there was not the slightest doubt of the Company purchasing my lease,’ answered Squire Dudley.

‘Yes, because Mr Black thought the management was going to be left entirely to him,’ was the reply. ‘Mr Black now finds he was a little mistaken, and that, being mistaken, he led you astray.’

‘He was the originator of the Company, or else I have been greatly misinformed,’ said Arthur, defiantly.

‘You have not been misinformed,’ Mr Stewart answered; ‘but the originator of a company does not necessarily mean the proprietor.’

Squire Dudley remained silent, digesting this piece of knowledge while Mr Stewart proceeded—

‘We directors are not necessarily his puppets because he brought

us together. Although he obtained our names, and qualified us to act on the board, he did not thereby obtain dominion over us, body and soul, for ever. Evidently, Mr Dudley, you are not a man of business, and you do not understand much about commercial matters—indeed, Mr Black implied that fact to me; therefore, as I happened to be staying with Miss Baldwin, I thought I would walk over, and have a little friendly conversation with you.'

'Do you mean,' asked Mr Dudley, harking back to the original question, 'that you absolutely refuse to purchase these premises in Lincoln's Inn Fields?'

'That is my meaning,' was the reply; 'if you press the matter, of course it will be brought before the board, Mr Black, probably, acting as your mouthpiece; but if you take my advice, you will not press the point, nor have it brought before the board; for I tell you fairly, the line must be drawn somewhere, and at that point I mean it to be marked broadly.'

'You are not the proprietor of the Company, are you?' asked Arthur.

'No; but I am the largest shareholder and the most influential man on the board,' was the reply.

'And what do you think of the scheme?' inquired Arthur, eagerly.

'I think the scheme a good one, if it be not swamped; if the capital be not all jobbed away on such purchases, for instance, as this house of yours.'

'Do you imply that I—,' began the Squire; but Mr Stewart cut across his sentence with—

'I imply nothing; all I would suggest is, that as at Mr Black's instance you bought a very bad bargain, you should not seek to foist that bargain at a profit on your own Company, but wait patiently for dividends, and be thankful for any profit on your shares the Lord may in due time send you.'

'Do you know, sir,' asked Arthur, 'that my money has advertised this Company?'

'Black said something of the kind,' answered Mr Stewart; 'and what he said, I am very sorry to hear confirmed by you.'

‘I have sold my crops, I have sold my stock, I have accepted bills, all on the faith of making my fortune out of this bread affair. Mr Black declared I could get my money back three times over by buying from time to time such properties as he might advise—shops, mills, and so forth. He assured me he could and would guarantee the Company purchasing them from me on the most favourable terms. He mentioned to me the names of several individuals who have all made large fortunes in the same way.

‘Yes, I know many men, as you say, who have obtained their money by jobbing,’ was the calm answer; ‘but they should not have got fat so soon had I been on the direction.’

‘It is rather hard upon me, though, to be made your scapegoat,’ said Arthur.

‘Perhaps so,’ agreed Mr Stewart; ‘but you know the innocent often suffer for the guilty. In fact, the scapegoat of which you have just spoken had not, so far as I am aware, committed any sin that should have doomed him to go unto a land not inhabited. He was selected impartially by lot, and then had to bear the iniquities of the children of Israel. You, Mr Dudley, are chosen by accident to bear by proxy Mr Black’s sins of over-appropriation. He has already had quite as many pickings for himself as any company can bear, and we cannot now tolerate his beginning to pick for his friends.’

‘And your object in coming to tell me all this, Mr Stewart?’ demanded Arthur.

‘Come, he is not quite an idiot,’ reflected that gentleman, while he answered aloud—‘My object is *bonâ fide*; I want to benefit you and myself also. I wish to explain exactly what I will and what I will not do. To begin with the last. I will not agree to the purchase of those premises in Lincoln’s Inn, but I shall not oppose the Company renting them from year to year; and, if you like to resign your directorship, I will see that you are appointed secretary at a commencing salary of one thousand pounds per annum.

‘What has the secretary to do?’ asked Arthur.

‘Very little, except remain honest,’ was the reply.

'And why do you wish me to be secretary?' he further demanded.

'Because I think we may depend upon you; because I know we could not depend on the secretary nominated by Mr Black. In matters of this kind it does not do to stand too much upon ceremony. Am I wrong, Mr Dudley, in supposing a thousand a year would prove an agreeable addition to your income?'

'I am not aware, sir,' answered Arthur, in a moment all in a flame with anger, 'that I have, in the course of your conversation, led you to believe I am short of money.'

'There is a difference between being short of money and desiring more money,' answered Mr Stewart, calmly. 'I concluded that, if you were a perfectly satisfied man, you would have rested content among your herds and flocks, and not sought to increase your store in the City. I thought I would come and talk this affair over with you before our next meeting; but if my doing so has assumed the character of an intrusion, I can only apologize and withdraw.'

Having concluded which speech, Mr Stewart rose from his chair, and, bowing to Arthur, would have left the room, had his host not entreated him to remain.

'I am almost mad, I think,' said the Squire, putting his hand to his forehead. 'Excuse me if I seemed rude. I do not believe I knew what I was saying. It is a desperate experiment, Mr Stewart, for a man who knows nothing whatever of business to allow himself to be drawn into it.'

'Yes,' answered the director, coolly; 'and it is in the interests of such men that I decline permitting this Company to be made a job, for the advancement and enriching of a few at the expense of the many. In my opinion, you have acted foolishly in advancing large sums of money to Mr Black; but it is to Mr Black you should look for repayment, not to the shareholders.'

Arthur made no reply. He sat with his head bent forward thinking to himself, 'what a cursed idiot I have been!' This was the first check he had met with, and he bore it with proportionate impatience. When a man has grown used to disappointment and reverses; when he has met with a long series of losses and failures; when his temper has become, after a fashion, macadamized, and his

spirit broken under the wheels of constantly passing hearses containing the bodies of his hopes, his certainties, his ambitious aspirings ; then the sharp pang which was once so impossible to endure, is dulled to a kind of quiet aching. The pain wears itself out as the months and the years go by ; and he who once chafed grows apathetic ; and she who formerly wept now smiles and bears in silence.

But Arthur Dudley's pain was fresh, and it had, moreover, come sharply and suddenly upon him.

He had been stricken unprepared, and, though the wound inflicted might not be very severe, still it smarted as much as though his life had been placed in jeopardy.

All this Mr Stewart observed and noted.

'That man has (for him) played high,' he thought, 'and staked not merely money but hope on the game ;' then finding Arthur still resolutely kept silence, he proceeded :

'Mr Black will altogether make a handsome thing out of this Company.'

'Yes, and he promised to go halves with me !' interrupted Arthur, hoarsely.

'Indeed ! and now he would fulfil that promise by showing you what to buy, and then recommending us to purchase from you ; a very nice way of doing business for him, doubtless—very nice indeed.'

'I wish to God I had never gone into the Company at all !' broke out the Squire, weakly and passionately ; 'and I did it on the strength of your name, and the names of men like you.'

'That was foolish,' said Mr Stewart ; 'if you had asked me for advice, I should decidedly have recommended you to leave the Protector Flour and Bread Company, Limited, alone.'

'But you expect to make money out of it,' said Arthur, obstinately.

'Yes, but I am also prepared to lose money,' was the reply ; 'which fact constitutes the difference between us. If a man be, as I have always been, a speculator, he takes the rough with the smooth, the failure with the success. I lay out my plans as well

as I can, but I, at the same time, take my chance. Moreover, Mr Dudley, I can afford to wait for success ; you, perhaps, are not quite so fortunately situated.'

'Did you come here to insult me ?' asked the Squire.

'No ; on the contrary, I came here to help you, if you will permit me to do so. We are not playing quite a fair game,' added the director, with sudden frankness. 'You are showing me your hand—I have scarcely given you a sight of mine. Suppose, I say unreservedly, I also have embarked more money in this venture than I should care to lose, we should then stand on more equal terms. You have advanced money to float the Company ; I am a shareholder—a *bonâ fide*. shareholder, remember—to a large amount ; I do not want our ship to go to the bottom, neither do you ; Mr Black, a very worthy individual, no doubt, has a knack of floating companies, and then sinking them. Now, it is not your interest, any more than it is mine, that this Company should fail ; we want to see the shares at a premium, and to secure regularly-paid and satisfactory dividends. There is nothing to prevent such a desirable consummation, if the affairs of the Company be only properly managed. Now, if any nominee of your friend, Mr Black, be appointed permanent secretary, there is no telling what the end of the matter may prove. Therefore, I offer you this secretaryship ; say the word, and you shall have it. We will rent the Lincoln's Inn premises from you ; there is a good house there in which you might reside, and you would then be on the spot to look after your own interests, and those of your fellow shareholders.'

Arthur wavered ; the temptation was great, the salary sounded large, but he did not feel inclined so readily to turn his back on an old friend.

'If you had such an opinion of Mr Black,' he said, 'why did you ever go into this Company with him ?'

'As for that,' answered Mr Stewart, with a smile, 'there is scarcely an undertaking of the kind which has not one black sheep at least in its ranks. Now, I am quite aware of the nature of Mr Black's weakness, and, you may recollect, it is stated to be better

to have to do with a devil you know than a devil you do not know. Further, Mr Black is undeniably clever, and he has, equally undeniably, got hold of a good thing.'

'And yet you say, had I consulted you in the first instance, you would have advised me to keep clear of it!'

'On the terms—yes,' was Mr Stewart's reply. 'Had Mr Black come to you and said, "Here are a couple of hundred shares, paid up, which will qualify you to act as a director, let me have your name on our board in exchange," I should have recommended you to accept his offer, because, if the Company succeeded, there were the shares; if it failed, you had no liability; either way, you would have been safe. But when it comes to advancing money—even on the best security that Mr Black could offer—the case is materially altered. I should not have counselled such a risk as that, Mr Dudley, depend upon it!'

'Do you think Mr Black will not repay me, then?' asked Arthur.

'I do not think Mr Black can repay you,' amended Mr Stewart; 'with the best will in the world, I am confident that he has not the means of doing so at present. His other companies will swallow up every available sixpence he can scrape together for the next twelvemonth.'

'But I have my shares,' said the Squire.

'True; but paid-up shares are never of any real marketable value, unless all the shares are paid up.'

'Why?' was the next inquiry.

'Because,' explained Mr Stewart, 'no man will pay ten pounds for that which he can buy immediately for two: as, for instance, if you went on the market to-morrow, you would not be so foolish as to purchase a paid-up share, in any company, for twenty pounds, if you could procure exactly the same advantages for five. You could but pay your calls, if they were demanded; you would not rush to your bankers and write a cheque for the full sum at once. In some prospectuses—in one of Mr Black's, by-the-by—there is a very delicious paragraph, to the effect, that "although no further calls will be made at shorter intervals than three months, and then in amounts not exceeding one pound per share, still the share"

holders may, at any time after allotment, pay up their shares in full, receiving interest on such payments at the rate of six per cent. per annum!" I never met with a man desirous of paying up his shares in full, however,' finished Mr Stewart with a quiet laugh.

'Do you mean, then, to tell me that until all the shares are paid up those I have will remain valueless?' demanded Arthur.

'Comparatively so,' was the reply.

'Then what good—if I cannot sell my shares, nor dispose of my property, and if there be no chance of Mr Black dividing his profits with me—is this Company likely to do to me or mine?'

'You will have your dividends, if we are lucky enough ever to get any,' answered Mr Stewart; 'and, should you entertain my proposal, I promise you the secretaryship also; that will yield you a thousand a year. Perhaps you will consider the matter, Mr Dudley, and let me know your decision before Saturday next. You have my address. I shall be returning to town to-morrow.'

And the great man rose to go, having, as he felt confident, settled the business which had brought him down into Hertfordshire.

Arthur accompanied him to the outer door.

'What a lovely place you have!' said the director, looking round, approvingly. 'A spot I should covet if it were twenty miles nearer London.'

'It is very inaccessible,' Arthur agreed. This light kind of conversation appeared to him very much like the political small talk to which a surgeon will sometimes treat a patient next day after an operation.

'It would not be exactly convenient for a man who wished to be in town every day at eight o'clock,' suggested Mr Stewart; 'but it is very charming, nevertheless. Good morning!' And this man, who was between seventy and eighty years of age, started off to walk back to Kemms Park, as briskly as Arthur himself might have done.

'Old enough to have given up grubbing after money,' muttered Arthur, criticising his visitor's retreating figure; as though a man ever fancied himself old enough to relinquish the occupation of his life, so long as he could hold a pen or dictate a letter, bring a bill into Parliament, or buy to advantage on the Stock Exchange.

Old enough ! Is it not only the young, now-a-days, who feel old and cry aloud for rest ; who grow weary and tired of the heat and burden of the noontide ? When the back has become used to the pack, and the world's collar has ceased to gall, the horse, let it be ever so old, will amble along the familiar road, without whip or spur to urge him on. It is the colts who turn aside, who long for the idle days and the green pastures, for the meadows where the holiday-folks are making merry, and the silvery streams flowing through the midst.

CHAPTER XXI.

A FEW BILLS.

HITHERTO, Squire Dudley had, since his connection with Mr Black, experienced no shortness of money. The man who spends two years' income in one does not, as a rule, find the pecuniary shoe begin to pinch until he enters on the second twelvemonth, and realizes to himself the truth that it is impossible both to spend and to have.

There is a time of plenty during which the prodigal wastes his substance and takes life easily, and then after that comes the season of famine, when he is fain to content himself with very roots and husks—when, having once entertained like a prince, he is compelled to expiate his folly in retirement, and refresh his spirit with herbs of the field and water from the brook.

In Joseph's dream, the seven fat kine preceded the seven lean ; the same rule was observed also in Squire Dudley's less prudent experience, though it produced by no means a like result. Never, for many and many a long year, had Arthur been so flush of cash, and so careless about expending it, as in the days before Mr Stewart's friendly visit.

Lightly come, lightly gone, that was the way with his money then ! It is difficult for a man, such as Arthur Dudley, exactly

to realize the fact that lending his name may eventually prove the hardest day's work he ever did in his life ; in truth, it is a fact difficult for any one unacquainted with business to understand theoretically. It is but a few strokes of the pen, and the thing is done. Your obliging friend, who has been kind enough to draw out the document for you, and perhaps even buy the stamp, gets the paper discounted. He takes out of it what you promised to let him have, and duly hands over the remainder.

The money is then a certainty—the bill, in allusion, is gone ; your friend will meet it, never fear. He tells you not to trouble your head about the matter. Like Mr Black, he will 'take a memorandum of it,' and that memorandum seems to you a perfect security for the genuineness of the transaction.

Time, however, goes by ; the money is spent, the bill is coming due ; then it is the first item which appears the illusion ; the latter, the certainty. Concerning wasted sovereigns and misspent five-pound notes, a useless jeremiade is sung.

If you had but the past to live over again, you think, how differently you would act ; meantime, however, you cannot live the past over again, and the bill is coming due.

When it does come due, there is only one thing of which you may be morally certain, namely, that you will have to take it up ; that, spite of your friend's memorandum and assurances, he will be at the last moment disappointed, and so disappoint you.

You have had your cake, or at least a portion of that dainty ; you have eaten and digested it ; and now comes the time for payment ; now come the anxious days and sleepless nights ; now begins the begging, borrowing, realizing ; you have within five pounds of the amount required—you might as well not have a penny ; you must scrape those other hundred shillings together before five o'clock on the evening of the day of presentation, or else your precious document falls into the notary's hands. In his hands there is still another short chance for your credit ; but fail to avail yourself of that, and what ensues ?

Mr Black was the man to have given every possible information on this subject. I do not think any other human being ever had so many bills returned to him as he ; it is doubtful if any one in

the length and breadth of London had devoted so much time to raising the wind ; whether there ever existed any one who, so almost invariably, never took up his bills at all, or drove up with what he called the needful to the door of his bank, at the very stroke almost of four, or rushed away to the other bank where the bill was lying, or else to the notary's in Finch Lane.

What a reality dishonoured bills may prove, Mr Peter Black had, many a time and oft, personally tested, in the pleasant retirement of the Cripplegate Hotel.

In the lofty public room of that desirable house of public entertainment, he had frequently made vows against paper, and mentally signed the pledge of total abstinence against all accommodation bills ; but vows registered among a number of fellow-victims, amid a Babel of strange tongues, or in the shady courts and cool corridors that used to be so much approved and patronized by former dwellers in Whitecross Street, with visions of angry creditors, and an unsympathetic commissioner in perspective, are apt to be forgotten when the man is free again—free to push his way forward—to trade, and struggle, and strive, and get into trouble again, if he list.

A bill was nothing to Mr Black. He had done in bills all his life. Trading, as was his fashion, always in advance of his fortune, it will readily be believed that 'paper' was to him the very soul of business—that soul, in fact, which animated what would otherwise have been a very dead, stupid, helpless sort of body.

Mr Black's diary of bills to meet was a literary curiosity well worth inspecting, if it were borne at the same time in mind that the promoter had not sixpenny-worth of real tangible property in the world.

But he had that which often stands a man in much better stead than property : he had faith ; and it is not in religious matters only that faith is able to remove mountains.

He believed utterly in himself and in his own financial abilities ; by means of this belief he was enabled not merely to remove mountains, but also to create them out of molehills ; wonderful companies—endless Limited Liabilities—great works were developed from the merest, paltriest, smallest businesses that any one could mention.

And because of his faith he was, conversationally, rather a pleasant man with whom to be connected in business. Let who else would sing a poor song, he 'never said die;' let who might be cross and changeable, faint-hearted and desponding, Mr Black was always the same.

Always self-reliant, cheery, hopeful, certain of success, that sort of man who never meets an acquaintance with a long face; who is not affected by the weather, who shakes hands just as heartily if the rain be pouring down heavens hard, as he would if it were the finest day in summer; who considers snow a joke, and frost an agreeable change; who is never down on his luck; whose barometer, according to his own showing, is always rising; with whom it is, at least, fair weather from January till December; who, if he do chance to get a heavy blow, is only staggered by it for the moment; who is not eternally complaining about his own health, or his wife's health, or the sickness of his ten children, or the bad state of trade, of the difficulties of fighting through, but who always says, with a cheery nod—

'Quite well, thank you. Business? oh, capital; never had such a month—more work to do than I can get through. Wish I could cut myself up to be in a dozen places at once. All well with you? that's right; good-day, good-day!'

To a man like this, it may readily be imagined, Arthur Dudley proved a perfect mine of wealth—a true God-send, as he reverently remarked to Mr Bailey Crossenham.

When first he and Arthur started together in the new Company, Mr Black informed the Brothers Crossenham that 'he drew it mild with the Squire;' but soon, finding that gentlemen believed every word he told him, the promoter grew less delicate, and would persuade his kinsman to accept three or four bills for him in the course of a week.

It was such a rare experience for Mr Black to hold thoroughly good paper—paper concerning which no objection could be made, that he felt it would be quite a slighting of Providence not to enjoy that strange sensation thoroughly.

To allow a name like Dudley's to waste its sweetness among the Hertfordshire fields, and never figure on stamped slips of foolscap

in banks and discount offices, would have seemed to Mr Black the merest quixotism.

Here was what he had always sighed for—a good name. Like the individual who would have given ten thousand pounds for a good character, because, on the strength of that character, he could have trebled that sum immediately, Mr Black conceived that one good name must inevitably lead to more. Should he suffer this gift to lie unused—should he allow this talent to remain buried in a napkin? Never; a thousand times, never. And, accordingly, he employed Arthur's name as freely as he might his own, which is saying a good deal; and Arthur rested satisfied.

Would not money turn in after Christmas. Were he and Mr Black not to go shares? Would those thousands not be returning to him from the sale of the Lincoln's Inn property? Was the Company not well thought of—well talked about? Had not Walter Hope—spite of his aunt's remonstrances—added his name to the Direction, without a moment's hesitation? Had he not said to Mrs Walter Hope,—

'And the dividends shall be yours, my love?' an arrangement which met with that lady's entire approval. Had Mr Douglas Croft not remarked that Black was 'a sly fox, but a devilish clever fellow—a fellow who could float anything, if he only took it into his head to do so?' Had he not tasted of the sweets of spending money freely—of spending without pausing first to consider, 'Can I afford this expense?'

His deeds now went in front, and his prudent thoughts lagged slowly behind. After the long Lent of fasting and humiliation—of poverty and strict abstinence from all extravagance—from all worldly pleasures—all social amusements—there suddenly dawned an Easter morning on his life, full of brightness and pleasure—a morning when the old traditions were forgotten, and a new era was begun.

Mr Stewart's visit was the first occurrence which cast an actual shadow over all this radiancy. Previously, light clouds might have swept across the sky—a few misgivings through his heart—so far, he had neither seen nor heard anything of the money, some portion of which he knew, for certain, Mr Black must have re-

ceived. Neither had letters from that gentleman arrived with quite their accustomed punctuality at Berrie Down. 'Christmas-time,' the promoter stated, threw everything, for a short period, out of gear, and then ensued silence, until on the morning of Mr Stewart's visit came a communication ending with these ominous words,— 'I am right for the bill due on Saturday, but should like to see you about the others.'

About the others! Good Heavens, what concern were they of Squire Dudley's? Mr Black, or the bank, or the Company, or somebody, was to take them up; certainly not Arthur.

The herds and flocks, the crops and Nellie, had represented to Squire Dudley tangible property advanced into the 'Protector Bread and Flour Company Limited,' but his name seemed the very vaguest valuable possible, and he had stared at first, when Mr Black suggested using it.

Now, however, the very vagueness of the threatened peril filled his mind with alarm. What could Mr Black want with him? and what did he mean by being 'right for that on Saturday?' Was he not right for all? and if he were not, how did he expect the sight of Squire Dudley to put him so?

There was a terrible uncertainty about the matter which seemed very frightful to Arthur; and then, on the top of this letter—following it almost as swiftly as the thunderclap does lightning—came Mr Stewart, and the interview already detailed.

Altogether, the second day in the new year was not one marked with a white stone in Squire Dudley's memory, yet it brought, in due time, its consolation, for pondering over the matter, Arthur discovered two tangible pieces of comfort on which to hang his hopes: one, the offer of the secretaryship; the other, Mr Stewart's own evident belief in the ultimate success of the Company.

'So I will run up to town to-morrow and see Black,' decided Squire Dudley—who had vainly striven to catch a glimpse of that gentleman on Boxing Day, when he went to inform Mr Ormson of his daughter's misdemeanor—'and I will tell him frankly about the secretaryship, so that there may be no underhand dealing in the matter, and I can see how the place in Lincoln's Inn would suit for a residence, and then give Mr Stewart a decided answer.'

Already his opera-box and horses and carriages, his grand town residence, his hunters, his hacks, his fashionable friends, were dwindling down to a thousand a year and a free house—to work which, slight though it might be, was more than he had ever thought of previously attempting. Already the dream-castle was beginning to fade away, and the sober stone-and-mortar building of reality taking its place; but Arthur Dudley resolutely refused to see the inevitable change which had commenced being wrought.

Bitten by the mania prevalent amongst those men with whom he had latterly freely associated, the Squire would not regard the secretaryship as anything except a useful step onward—a mere trifle which would keep him in funds till the Company began to pay dividends, and shares rose to some enormous premium.

When a person is making an imaginative fortune, there can be no possible reason why he should not do the thing thoroughly.

Mentally, it is as easy to nett fifty thousand pounds as one—to send shares up to fabulous prices as to keep them at par; in fact, if a man once lets his fancy get the reins, he may mount to whatever height pleases him and his charioteer best.

The only drawback to which proceeding is, that if he get a fall, he stands a chance of being badly injured by it. Even Fancy seldom travels with a free ticket—there are expenses incident on a too great intimacy with that fair lady. She is apt to lead people a good deal astray sometimes, with her glancing smiles and her bright bewitching eyes—with her sweet tones, which fall so pleasantly on the ear—with her seductive words, which ring such pleasant changes on the usually prosaic bells of life.

But Arthur Dudley was not a man to turn back into the cold realms of reality when once he had basked in the sunshine of prospective success. Children think that they can keep back the rain-cloud by turning their eyes away from that corner of the heavens whence the wind is blowing; and, in like manner, Squire Dudley persisted in looking at the spot of blue which revealed itself in his sky, and resolutely ignoring all the blackness which was sweeping up behind.

‘The “Protector” should pay’—even Mr Stewart had said something to that effect; and the very first thing which met Arthur’s

delighted gaze, as he walked down Gray's Inn Lane from the King's Cross Station, was a huge vehicle—apparently constructed on the joint models of a police-van and a cattle-truck, driven by a man in a quiet livery of orange and green, and guarded by a hanging footman, decked out in the like complimentary colours—which vehicle bore on its sides this inscription :—

‘VIS UNITA FORTIOR,’

the motto of the Company, its device being a bundle of sticks firmly tied together.

Then followed—

‘PROTECTOR’

FLOUR AND BREAD COMPANY (LIMITED).

INCORPORATED UNDER ACT OF PARLIAMENT,

For the purpose of Supplying the Public with the Best Bread
at the Lowest Possible Price.

If this did not look like business, Arthur wondered what would. If all that varnish and gilding, all that lettering and painting, did not indicate success, he was very much out in his calculations. It was only the third day for the vans to be out, and they had not yet lost their pristine brilliancy. They were clean and fresh, as though they had that moment come out of the builder's hands—the liveries were free from spot or stain—the brass of the harness was bright as lacquer—the horses were groomed to perfection—the drivers and the men behind both looked, in their fine conspicuous clothing, conscious and conceited, and, perhaps, a little shamefaced besides.

The London boys cheered the splendid conveyance, and put, at the same time, various rude questions to the individuals in charge.

The idle, dirty, half-starved looking women who are always gathered round the entrance to those wretched courts leading out of Gray's Inn Lane, stared after the vehicle, and made audible comments upon it, which Arthur could hear as he passed by.

Very well-dressed people also took notice of the van, and wondered what the meaning of the motto might be. Ladies were especially interested in this question ; and Arthur longed to stop and tell a few of the sweet creatures—not merely the English of *Vis Unita Fortior*, but also that he was one of the directors in the great Company.

Walking down Gray's Inn Lane, the Squire certainly was a proof of the truth of his own quotation. As a master baker, singly, he would have felt very much ashamed of his trade, and vexed by any public recognition of it. As a master baker, associated with other gentlemen and noblemen also bakers, Squire Dudley conceived himself a person of importance, one of a body of philanthropists, who, 'hearing the cry of the people for bread, pure bread, sweet, wholesome, nutritious bread, at a moderate price, had determined of forming themselves into a Company which, under the name of the 'Protector,' should guard alike the rights of producer and consumer—supply the public with the best bread at the lowest remunerative prices—ensure to the shareholders a fair and certain return for capital—do away with unwholesome, ill-ventilated, badly-constructed, insufficient and uncleanly bakehouses, and render the trade wholesome and remunerative to the employés connected with it, instead of permitting it to remain, as hitherto, a blot on nineteenth century civilization—one of the most enervating, pestiferous, dangerous trades which could be conceived.'—*Vide Prospectus.*

This is one of the many beauties of a Limited Liability Company ; a man can have all the excitement, profit, and pleasure of trade, without any of its unpleasantness.

If he be one of the directors on the board of, say 'The Private Dwelling Chimney-Sweeping Association,' he still remains a gentleman.

In the Bankruptcy Court, indeed, where some singular anomalies are still permitted to exist, he might be styled a dealer and chapman ; but in West End drawing-rooms his standing is above suspicion. He is a wise individual who, despising trade, is still not above making use of it ; who, knowing nothing of business, would nevertheless go and reap of the corn which his hand neither

planted nor watered ; he can do, as Squire Dudley wished to do, 'gather where he has not strawed,' and march in and out of City offices as though the whole of the Lord Mayor's kingdom from Ludgate to the Tower, and from Moorgate to London Bridge, belonged to him.

It was with this feeling Arthur Dudley, spite of his anxieties, entered the temporary offices in Dowgate Hill, where he was greeted by Mr Black with an uproarious joviality.

'Well, old fellow, and how are you ? Bills brought you up express, I see ; though nothing short of them could get me a speedy sight of you. I did not want you about them at all, you know, really, for I could have sent you the renewals to sign by post as easily as not. Yes, we must renew. I have such a devil of a lot of things on hand at the present time—good things, but still all crying out for money. Well, and how are you ? and your charming lady, and my friend Lally, you know ? Poor little cricket ! I was deucedly sorry to hear of her being so ill ; and oh ! isn't that a business about Ormson's daughter ! By Jove ! the old man is cut up, and no mistake. Mrs O. takes it better than he—comes the Roman matron and that sort of thing ; think I liked her quite as well before I heard her declaiming against the girl. Mrs Black believes her sister forced Bessie to accept Harcourt against her will, and led her a nice life at home over it. I always considered Mrs O. a very superior sort of woman ; but I suppose God who made it is the only one who rightly understands female nature. It is an enigma to me. Who's she off with, Squire ? Come, it is all in the family, and you need not keep the matter dark here.'

'I have not the remotest idea,' answered Arthur. 'No one seems able to give the slightest clue. She must have been a sly, deep girl to make a flight like that. She bribed one of the servants, went down the back staircase, out across the farm-yard, away long the field avenue, and so into Berrie Down Lane, where her lover, it appears, was waiting for her.'

'She was a very pretty girl, Dudley,' said Mr Black, meditatively, speaking of her beauty already in the past tense.

'I never saw anything so particularly wonderful about her,' answered Arthur, coolly.

‘Well, she might not be your style, you know; but still she was undeniably pretty. Talking about style, by-the-by, I saw your old flame, Mrs Croft, yesterday. I suppose you are not touchy about a fellow speaking his mind concerning her? You had a miss there—such as a man might have of losing his life. I’d as lief be married to the devil. Croft asked me up to dinner, and I don’t think that madame liked it; at any rate, she made herself so confoundedly disagreeable that Croft seemed downright ashamed of her. And didn’t she nag him! that is enough. He broke a vase on the drawing-room chimney-piece after dinner, and I never heard a poor beast so pitched into in all my life. And before the servants, too! If she had said the one-half to me she said to him, I should not have minded doing six months for what I would have given her. A man was telling me a good thing about Croft the other day. It appears he had been complaining to some of his wife’s male relations about the way she goes on, and this fellow, some fool of a swell, did not seem able to make out what exact fault Croft laid to her charge. “Isn’t she pwoper?” he drawled out. “Proper!” says Croft, in that sharp off-hand way of his, “damnably proper.” Ah, we may laugh at it,’ went on Mr Black, doubtless speaking figuratively, for he was not laughing, and not a ghost of a smile could have been detected on Arthur’s face; ‘but it must be the very deuce to be tied to a woman like that. While she was going on at him, blowing him up sky-high, and sweeping about in her grand dress, with a crinoline big enough to have camped out under, I thought of your wife, Squire, and I said to a man this very morning, not half-an-hour ago,—

‘Well, Dudley must be a deuced lucky fellow—not merely to have missed that woman, but to have got the wife he has. There is no sham there—no angel one day, and devil the next.’

Arthur cleared his throat. He felt as though he were choking; he wanted to make some withering speech in answer to this officious fool, but he was not quick of wit nor ready with repartee.

First, to lose a woman, to be jilted, to have an heiress slip out of his fingers, to be supplanted by a wealthier suitor, to be flung back from the height of prospective affluence to the dead level of certain poverty, and then to be congratulated on the subject, and

called a lucky fellow! To hear another man who had gained the prize pitied for his success, and he, Arthur, felicitated on having chosen a wife who did not suit him in the least. Arthur knew Heather did not suit him—that she was not the woman he ought to have married. At that moment he felt very ungrateful both towards Heaven and the helpmeet Heaven had sent him, and he felt further that he hated Mr Black with a perfect hatred, for which reason, as he could not think of any specially clever or cutting remark that might advantageously be uttered, he turned the conversation into a channel which he thought must prove disagreeable to Mr Black, and said,—

‘Speaking of Croft, Stewart called on me yesterday.’

‘Ah, yes,’ answered the promoter, briskly; ‘been down staying with his cousin, the Honourable Augusta, I hear. That would be a nice suitable match, now; thought it likely he might call. He told you he meant to oppose the purchase of your Lincoln’s Inn speculation, I suppose?’

‘Your Lincoln’s Inn speculation, rather,’ retorted Arthur, a little indignantly.

‘Our Lincoln’s Inn speculation, then, to meet the views of both parties,’ proposed Mr Black. ‘So he called to tell you about that, did he? People’s ideas of civility differ. I would just as soon call on a man to pick his pocket as to inform him I meant to overthrow his plans.’

‘That was not Mr Stewart’s sole object in calling,’ remarked Arthur.

‘Oh! indeed; and what might his object be, if I am not too inquisitive?’

‘Not at all; I came up partly on purpose to tell you. Guess the nature of the proposal he made.’

‘That you should wind up the Company, or try to do so; that he and you and Mr Raidsford and Lord Kemms should start an opposition bakery of your own; that you should purchase Mr Scrotter’s flour-mill, and sell it to the Company; that you and Mr Stewart should agree to support each other through everything. There, I have guessed often enough. What is this wonderful proposal which he made to you yesterday?’

‘Guess again. I would rather that you jumped at it yourself.’

‘Hang it! I can’t guess what the old humbug wanted with you. Did he propose marrying one of your sisters?—or—I have it!’ exclaimed Mr Black; ‘he offered you the secretaryship?’

‘He did.’

‘And you accepted it?’

‘No, I did not: I felt a delicacy—’

‘Felt nonsense!’ interrupted Mr Black; ‘how could you be such a simpleton? You must be rich to throw away a thousand a year for delicacy! Deuce a thing to do except sit before the fire for a certain number of hours reading the *Times*—have clerks under you to do everything—read the *Times* for you, if you like! And a secretaryship to which you are appointed through the interest of Allan Stewart! By Jove! it is as good as an annuity. You felt a delicacy about interfering with Mr Crossenham—that’s the hitch, is it? Very nice, and proper, and gentlemanly indeed—very; but Crossenham, you see, is not going to retain the secretaryship—no, not if we went down on our knees and prayed him to keep it, which I, for one, have no intention of doing.’

‘Why will he not keep it?’ asked Arthur, in amazement.

‘Because it don’t suit him,’ was the reply. ‘He has always been used to work, and he don’t like idling. He says he has no fancy for loafing about, with his hands in his pockets, drawing only a poor two hundred and fifty a quarter, when there are thousands of pounds to be picked up by any one willing to look out for chances. Of course, he is quite another style of fellow from what you are, Dudley. He has been in business all his life; and what really is a very good appointment for you, seems almost like shelving him. I thought, as his health was not very good, he might be glad of such a berth. But no; he is hungering and thirsting after work—work, and no gammon—that is what he calls it. Besides, he hates talking to those swells who are quite in your way, you know. If Crossenham be your only objection, here is pen, ink, and paper—write at once to Mr Stewart, and say you accept his offer.’

‘But if I do that, I bind myself not to ask the Company to purchase my Lincoln’s Inn property.’

'And much good it would do if you did ask the Company to purchase it, with Allan Stewart against you! Look here, Dudley-Stewart is going to be the god of our board; so your best plan, if you want things to go pretty square, is, thankfully to receive all he likes to offer you. My power is gone, you know. Whenever he came crowing it over me, with his shares, and his influence, and his wealth, and his connection, I gave in at once; so take a friend's advice, and accept. Did he promise to rent the house from you? That is right. He proposed you should live there! The very best thing possible. Good airy rooms, central situation, near the theatres, accessible to everywhere!'

'And about those bills! Mr Black?'

'Yes, about those bills! We must renew for a few months, till my ventures begin to make me some return. A mere matter of form! I will pay the interest, of course, and you shall have back the old bills. Here, Collins,' cried Mr Black, opening the door between the two offices, 'run over the way and get me a pound's worth of bill-stamps. Three shilling and two shilling—four of each. Look sharp, now, and don't be the whole day about it. While we are "melting," you might as well have a few hundreds, might you not, Dudley? You will want some money to carry you over till quarter-day, and there will be the expenses connected with moving, and so forth. How much?—say three! You know we can always get more if you run short.'

'But supposing you are unable to meet those bills?' ventured Arthur.

'Why, then, we must renew again,' answered Mr Black, cheerily, 'and renew, and renew, and renew till one or other of us comes into his fortune. We cannot be kept out of it for ever,' added Mr Black, jocularly. There was no having this man; once afloat with him, no one need ever after expect to touch solid land—once launched in the same boat, and you had to obey Captain Black, who would have laughed while sending one of the crew to his death, and kept 'up the steam' had his nearest friend been dying.

Spite of his good spirits, however, Arthur ventured to interrogate him concerning the marketable value of paid-up shares, as to

which the promoter's opinion was almost identical with that of Mr Stewart.

'But they are available as security,' proceeded Mr Black. 'For instance, if you were pushed for money, you could get an advance upon them. They are much the same as Berrie Down, you understand, tangible property—something to show, if a creditor turns crusty, or discount rises too high. We shall, all of us, do very well yet; and I am glad you are coming to town. You will never care to go back to Hertfordshire afterwards, even when you are worth ten thousand a year. Here are the stamps; that is right. Now, Dudley, I must trouble you for a moment. Let us first see the amounts, however, of those we must renew;' and Mr Black, pulling out his pocket-book, consulted various memoranda which it contained, all having reference to certain of the bills coming due as fast as the autumn peaches ripen.

'I may as well give you a cheque for three hundred,' said Mr Black; 'no need to be sending it down after you;' and Peter Black forthwith drew a cheque for three hundred pounds in favour of Arthur Dudley, Esquire, on order, which document he crossed, 'Hertford and South Kemms' Banking Company.'

Mr Stewart would have known that he did this in order to give himself time to get some of Arthur's acceptances discounted before the cheque came back to his bankers; but Squire Dudley, being less acquainted with business manoeuvres than the great director, thought it was all in the ordinary course of affairs.

It did not occur to him either as singular that many of the bills he accepted should bear no drawer's signature attached—an omission Mr Stewart would at once have detected and challenged.

Truth was, Mr Black and the two Crossenhams played into each other's hands, thus: the Crossenhams would get a bill discounted at their bankers, the produce of which Black would then pay into his own bank. Then he would get a bill discounted, with Crossenhams' name to it as drawer, and hand that amount over to Crossenhams. Thus, the bills were dancing about like shuttlecocks—they were paid away, they were discounted, they were given as security, and nobody but Mr Black knew for what exact sum Arthur had made himself liable.

‘Enough to puzzle Berrie Down,’ said Mr Black to himself, thoughtfully, as, after Arthur’s departure, he totted up the amounts attached to the memoranda of which mention has previously been made; ‘enough to puzzle Berrie Down, if the “Protector” come to grief; but it shall not do that, not, at any rate, until I have had my penn’orths out of it.’

Having arrived at which prudent and honest conclusion, Mr Black closed his pocket-book, circling it for extra security with an india-rubber band. That pocket-book, which never left Mr Black’s person except when he was asleep (and then he locked it up in a small safe in his dressing-room), contained all the present secrets of the promoter’s life.

Had Mr Stewart only obtained a sight of the pages that band kept so tightly together, he might reasonably have considered the ultimate success of the ‘Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited,’ problematical.

CHAPTER XXII.

HOW HEATHER TOOK IT.

THE Secretaryship was duly accepted, although not by letter; Arthur Dudley thought it best to call upon Mr Stewart and express in person his willingness to fill up the post offered.

Probably a secret pride influenced this determination. After a fashion, he was going to be the man’s servant; but that was no reason why he should not return Mr Stewart’s call, and place himself on a footing of social equality with him.

For this reason, also, he did not walk from Dowgate Hill to King’s Arm Yard, and take his chance of seeing Mr Stewart at his office, as anybody else, standing less upon his dignity, might have done; but, at considerable inconvenience, repaired next afternoon to the great director’s house, where, of course, he did not find him.

This, however, was a matter of secondary importance. The

Squire had done the proper thing in the proper manner, and, having left his card, went back to Mr Black's abode satisfied.

The same evening a messenger arrived in Stanley Crescent with a note from Mr Stewart, expressive of regret at having missed seeing Mr Dudley, and begging him to breakfast with the writer the following morning at ten o'clock.

'A business fellow,' observed Mr Black, approvingly, 'and worth such a lot of money; I wonder who will have it when he dies. Croft, likely as not. Is there not some scripture about people who have much, getting more?'

Very heartily Arthur Dudley secretly anathematized this Croft, who seemed to be now, as he thought, for ever under his nose.

Already he was beginning to have personal experience of the truth Mr Raidsford had mentioned to Lord Kemms—namely, that people always meet again; that, let the circle in which they revolve be large or small, still they ultimately come back to the point whence they started, and are brought once more into contact with the men and the women they knew at that period in their career.

If he please, a man may, like Arthur Dudley, curse the old ties, and strive to break away from them; but, like Arthur Dudley also, he will find after the years that there is no severance possible.

Friends and acquaintances, those whom we once knew well, those whom we have merely met, crop up continually in our path. We come across them in unlikely places; we encounter them in strange houses; we are thrown against them under the most singular circumstances. We leave them, as we think, behind, and behold, we discover, when the years roll by, that they have been travelling also; that, during all the time which seemed to be increasing the distance between us, we have really been traversing gradually converging lines, which bring us, after the springs, and the summers, and the autumns, and the winters, face to face at last.

Here, after years, for instance, was Squire Dudley brought into contact once again with the people he had known and dwelt among in his earlier manhood; here, also, he was going to breakfast with the bachelor of Scotch proclivities, who had so long ago influenced the name bestowed upon Heather at her baptism. Once more

there was a likelihood of Mrs Dudley reviving the associations of her childhood, and meeting with some of the members of her own kith and kin.

The Bells of Layford—amongst whom figured prominently a Sir Wingrave Bell—had long been friends of Mr Allan Stewart.

Scottish people all, come southward, they hung together after the goodly manner of their country; and, very probably, had it not been for the unhappy quarrel which ended in utter alienation between the Rector of Layford and his cousin and patron's eldest friend and ally, Mr Stewart would have done well for his god-child when she was left an orphan, and not relinquished her without a struggle into the hands of Mrs Travers, who had proved herself, perhaps, a little unduly anxious to be rid of such a trust.

As it was, when Mr Bell died, Mr Stewart chanced to be abroad. On his return he casually inquired what had become of the daughter, and being informed that her aunt had taken the orphan to her own home, let the matter drop out of his recollection. Of Heather's connection with Arthur Dudley he was completely ignorant, and Arthur was not the man to acquaint him with it.

But yet, while the Squire sat opposite to his host at breakfast, he was wondering whether in due course of time, if the fact did by any chance come to Mr Stewart's knowledge, it might not prove beneficial to himself; induce the director to withdraw his opposition concerning the purchase of that 'desirable house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, with yard at the back, over which a large room could be built (see advertisement), and the right of walking in the gardens of the Square.'

Why this last clause always presented itself to Arthur Dudley's mind, it would be somewhat difficult to say, since a board of directors is not usually alive to the advantages of a 'key to the Square;' but still, that it did present itself is unquestionable, and he thought about it while Mr Stewart said he was glad to hear his visitor had decided not to press the matter on the Company, but to accept the secretaryship, and take up his residence in Lincoln's Inn.

'A very good situation for a dwelling,' finished Mr Stewart, who would as soon have thought of living in Lincoln's Inn as he would

have thought of flying ; 'and a good house too. You are married, I presume?'

Arthur admitted the correctness of Mr Stewart's supposition.

'That is right ; every man ought to marry,' said the bachelor. 'Have you any children?'

'Two—a boy and girl,' said the Squire ; 'one of them is in very bad health. I do not know what her mother will think about bringing her to town.'

'You have not mentioned your intentions; then, to Mrs Dudley?' said Mr Stewart, apparently surprised.

'I thought it would be time enough to tell her when the matter was settled,' answered Arthur.

'Evidently, then, you will not consider it necessary to take your wife into your confidence concerning all the affairs of our Company?' suggested the director.

'I do not think women ever understand anything of business matters,' Arthur replied ; then, noticing Mr Stewart smile, he added, 'and I am positive my wife would not wish me to tell her any of the affairs of my principals.'

'I have heard of Mrs Dudley as a lady of an excellent discretion,' said Mr Stewart.

'You do not expect me to praise my own wife,' answered Arthur, deprecating this praise ; and the evasion was really rather a clever one for him. If he had praised her at all, however, it would simply have been as his wife, and because she belonged to him, not in her mere capacity as a woman.

Mr Stewart felt curious about this Mrs Dudley, whose husband so decidedly refused to speak of her. Miss Baldwin had been by no means so reticent. She had described Heather to her cousin, and told him all about the brothers and sisters who used to run wild before the young wife's arrival at Berrie Down. Lally also was not left out of the narrative. 'The sweetest little creature in the world,' the Honourable Augusta declared ; 'just the child you would love, Mr Stewart.'

'I never saw the child I loved yet,' said the old bachelor, somewhat incredulously, 'and I do not think I ever shall.'

Notwithstanding this speech, however, Mr Stewart had been

secretly touched by Miss Baldwin's description of mother and child, which description caused him to form a mental picture of Mrs Dudley that did not exactly frame in the setting Arthur now provided for her.

'Is this fellow such a weak fool as to be envious of his wife,' thought the director; 'or is there really some flaw in his pearl of which the little world of South Kemms is not cognisant?' Mr Stewart could not understand his companion's domestic relations, so he thought he would try him on another tack—his children.

'I heard something, when I was at Kemms Park, about your little girl having met with an accident,' he began.

'Yes, she fell into that mill-pond at the bottom of my farm, and was nearly drowned,' Arthur replied, shortly.

'She has been very ill since that, though, has she not?' asked Mr Stewart, who was beginning to think his visitor carried his ideas of politeness a little too far.

'Very ill; but she is now out of danger.'

'Do you think of bringing her up to town?'

'That will be a question for her mother to decide.'

'Was there ever such a prig before!' thought the director; but he said out loud, 'Then you take nothing to do with such minor matters?'

'Nothing,' answered Arthur, decidedly; 'my wife has had a vast amount of anxiety concerning the child, and I should not like to interfere; though, I should think,' added the Squire, 'that if once we could get her up to London and under better medical treatment, she would soon be well again.'

'Why do you not take a doctor down to see her?' asked Mr Stewart.

'The expense,' murmured his guest.

'True, I had forgotten,' said the director apologetically; but while he meditatively finished his tea, he remembered the money Arthur had advanced to Mr Black, and spent uselessly on the purchase of the house he now proposed occupying.

'I presume that, whether or not Mrs Dudley come to town at once, you can enter on the duties of your new post immediately?' Mr Stewart said, at length.

‘Certainly ; if my wife be afraid of leaving home, one of my sisters must come up and keep house for me.’

‘You have sisters, then ?’

This was enough ; that question speedily loosened Arthur’s tongue ; on that portion of his family history he was never—the chance of speaking being given to him—dumb.

‘Yes, he had sisters, but they were not his own, they were sisters by a second marriage. His father had made a most imprudent choice of a wife without money or connection, who brought five children into the world that I,’ said Arthur, ‘have had to clothe, educate, and support. That is what has kept me a poor man. For thirteen years I have had that burden to carry. You cannot wonder at my being as I am. One of the boys has now got a situation, but he is only earning thirty pounds a year, and that will not do much towards keeping him. You perceive how necessary it is for me to add to my income. With my own children growing up, it is impossible for me to avoid feeling uneasy.’

‘Your sisters will marry ?’ suggested Mr Stewart.

‘I do not know who is to marry them,’ said Arthur, ruefully.

‘People do not know generally, until the right man comes,’ said the bachelor, laughing.

Arthur struck him as being eminently absurd. It was long since he had come in contact with a man he more thoroughly despised ; but all unconscious of the impression he was producing, Arthur went on talking of his grievances, of how badly fortune had treated him, and Mr Stewart encouraged such talk. He wanted to know of what stuff his companion was made ; and so Arthur proceeded, without the faintest idea crossing his mind that he was revealing himself all the while in a most unfavourable light ; that there was not a speck, or flaw, or weak point, in his most weak character, which his host was not examining critically and cynically.

Away from Heather, away from that most beautifying influence, which made even his faults seem errors, to be lightly viewed and tenderly treated for the sake of the love she bore him ; away from the wife, who was unto him as a crown giving some faint semblance of man’s royalty to that poor weak brow, Arthur stood con-

fessed for what he was—a feeble, impulsive, wearisome, selfish egotist, who had a quarrel with the world, because, while it contained rich and poor, he did not stand amongst the former; who laid the burden of his ill-success on every back save his own; who would not look on the bright side of his actual existence, but had suffered himself to be led away after a will-o'-the-wisp by Mr Black, and who lacked, as Mr Stewart delicately implied to him, sense and energy sufficient to make a good thing of his life, and a good income out of Berrie Down.

‘You have no rent to pay,’ said the director; ‘it seems to me you might have got a fortune out of that lovely place of yours, had you only gone to work thoroughly.’

‘How?’ asked Arthur, helplessly.

‘How? why, how do other people make money out of land—make money and pay heavy rents into the bargain? Do not think me impertinent, if I say I would rather have trusted to the sense and gratitude of Berrie Down Hollow than of Mr Black.’

Arthur could not help thinking Mr Stewart not merely impertinent but foolish, although he replied,

‘I do not think there is much money to be made by farming.’

‘Don’t you!’ said Mr Stewart. ‘I fancy I have made more money by farming than by anything else; but, however, no doubt you know your own business best—every man does.’

Arthur imagined he did, at any rate; nevertheless, he left Mr Stewart with a certain depression of spirit, which was, however, in due time chased away by Mr Black.

‘Come up again!’ said that gentleman. ‘No, you need not; deuce a bit of necessity for anything of the kind. Leave all to me. I’ll see the house is ready for you; Mrs Black will send in a charwoman, and all that sort of thing. I shouldn’t move even a table from Berrie Down; nothing but plate and linen. No use breaking up a home. You’ll want to run down there occasionally from Saturday till Monday. We’ll all run down. Should not go to the expense; you will furnish as cheaply as you could move your sticks. Leave all to me. I’ll not put you to unnecessary expense: but you know you must have decent furniture about you. Servants! Oh, better let Mrs Dudley see to them—whatever

messenger we have can be made useful as footman also, remember. You'll charge him to the Company, as well as coals, gas, taxes, and so forth. By Jove ! Dudley, it will be a first-rate thing for you. Living free, as one may say, and drawing a thousand a year. I'll get the painters and paper-hangers in at once, and report progress. The place shall be ready for you in a fortnight. There, there, no thanks ; tut, tut, man, don't make a fuss over such a trifle. Good-bye ! Remember me to Mrs Dudley. Good-bye !' and, amid much waving of hands and excited adieux, the train steamed out of the station, and Arthur was off for Palinsbridge, while Mr Black returned to the City.

All the way down Arthur thought how he should best break the news to Heather. It seemed to him now, that if he had only made a confidante of her all along, his way would have proved easier. He should now have to tell her the whole from the beginning, or at least as much of the whole as he ever meant to tell her. How he had listened to the voice of the charmer ; how the charmer had given him shares in the Protector Bread Company, Limited ; how he had been offered the secretaryship of that thriving Company ; how he thought a thousand a year much too good a chance to be refused ; how he had promised Mr Stewart to enter on his duties at once ; how there was a house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, rented by the Company, which they were to inhabit.

He would have to tell her all this, but he need tell her no more ; he need not add how foolish and trustful he had been ; he need make no mention of bills or money ; there was no necessity for him to say anything about the house in Lincoln's Inn, which he had purchased.

As for Berrie Down, to which some one must see, could not Mrs Piggott take charge of it ? Mrs Piggott and Ned. Suppose Ned and Mrs Piggott made a match of it.

Mrs Piggott had, indeed, if all accounts were to be believed, led her deceased husband such a 'devil of a life,' that he was glad, after three years' patient endurance of her temper, to skulk under ground to get rid of it ; but then those days lay very far back in the woman's life ; she had been forced to struggle with the world ; she had buried two children ; she had 'supped sorrow with the

spoon of grief,' and there are some natures to whom sorrow taken in any form proves a very wholesome medicine.

It had done so in Mrs Piggott's case; the years had softened her, tamed her spirit, subdued her temper. She would have made a very good wife to any one wanting an elderly managing woman to cook his dinner and keep his house tidy; a very good wife indeed for Ned, who had worshipped his lost and lamented Polly—a 'fine woman,' large, well-developed, and handsome, whose only fault was mildly represented by Ned to have been, that her delicate health obliged her to take more gin than was always good for her.

Like Mr Piggott, Polly had long been slumbering where gin is not procurable; and thus Squire Dudley's idea concerning a match being got up between the pair was perfectly feasible, and likely, so he thought, to meet the views of all parties interested in the matter.

Mrs Piggott was faithful and trustworthy. So also was Mr Edward Byrne, a gentleman of Irish extraction on his father's side—a soft, willing, hard-working fellow, full of odd sayings, and possessed of unfailing spirits, which kept him continually at high pressure, and ready at all times for anything, 'from pitch-and-toss to manslaughter.'

Byrne could saddle a horse, and ride it afterwards; harness one or a pair, and drive it or them likewise; he could churn and he would pump; he darned his own stockings, and he cobbled his own shoes. He was always up betimes in the morning, and could be depended on to see to the feeding of the sheep and the foddering of the cattle. To Ned was intrusted the key of the oat-bin, and he always presided over the brewing of the ale. It was he who had the mowers at work at five o'clock in the summer's mornings, whilst the grass was still wet and heavy with dew; he who stacked the oats and went to market for Squire Dudley. And yet, Ned was not proud. Mrs Piggott objected to young men and boys about the house, so he did not disdain cleaning the knives and polishing the boots, singing to himself all the while like a perfect nightingale, or else talking to Mrs Piggott or the servants, and recounting to them tales of a far remote period in his life when he was 'devil' in a printing-office, and had to 'cut about' with proof.

Then, Ned had acquired literary tastes and a knowledge of minstrelsy, which made him a perfect treasure at harvest-homes, sheep-shearings, and such-like. Amongst his class he was considered an orator, and it is greatly to be questioned whether Mario was ever more warmly applauded than Mr Byrne, when at the festive board he 'favoured the company' with 'Auld Lang Syne.'

A true diplomatist, he always selected songs which would bear a chorus, well knowing that the true secret of personal popularity is to induce every one to believe that some portion of that popularity is reflected on him or her.

A man is, as a rule, much more heartily clapped when the audience feel they are clapping themselves at the same time—clapping their own talents, sentiments, virtues; and Ned's admirers accordingly stamped their feet, and hammered on the table with their spoons and knives, in precise proportion as the chorus to Mr Byrne's melody had been long, loud, and discordant.

After leaving the printing-office, which he quitted because, as he stated, the hours kept by authors were bad for his constitution, he obtained a situation with a lawyer residing in the Temple, whose hours proved to be still worse than those affected by the authors with whom Ned had previously associated.

'You might get some sleep in the one case, drop off in the hall, or have forty winks sitting on the stairs, but with Mr Froom there was rest neither day nor night,' he said; so, finding that town habits were not to his mind, that he had to work harder in London than 'anybody ever was asked to work in the country,' Ned, then a stunted, pale-faced, sickly lad, resolved to cut the undesirable acquaintance of members both of the literary and legal professions, and return home to those peaceful shades where, in former days, he had digested fat bacon, cheese in quantity, and—

'Home-made bread
As heavy as lead;'

to say nothing of various other delicacies; such as batter and Yorkshire puddings, treacle roll-up, bubble-and-squeak, toad-in-the-hole, harslet-pie. and liver-and-crow—fearful combinations, which are all

as appetising to the agricultural classes as the daintiest dishes of a French *chef* to the upper ten thousand.

Upon this fare, Ned, in the pure country air, throve and grew apace, and when, in due time, he took service with Major Dudley, of Berrie Down, he was a fine, strapping fellow, willing and able to do almost anything in the way of farm labour, and not above putting his hand to whatever his hand found to do. He had been 'odd and useful man' at Berrie Down so long back as the memory of Arthur Dudley extended. His hair had grown grey from the passage of years spent at the Hollow, and not, as he facetiously informed young women, from his having stayed out too long in the wet one night and got mouldy.

He was faithful and unambitious; but, nevertheless, he had money to the good in South Kemms Bank,—a fact which it is fortunate Mr Black never suspected, or he might, in the course of his wanderings over the farm, and long discourses with Ned, have induced him to go in for shares, and inoculated man as well as master with a mania for speculation.

Mrs Piggott, likewise, had saved money. Why should the pair not marry, and unite their common earnings against the day when more work for either would be impossible? Ned would make a good husband to any woman; Mrs Piggott would see to his meals and his comforts, and, perhaps, not be too hard upon him if he did take a pint too much ale at any of the rustic gatherings.

Why should they not marry? why, at all events, should they not be put in charge? That is, if Heather objected, as Arthur feared she would, to leaving the girls and Cuthbert at the Hollow; while he, and she, and Lally, and Leonard, went up to town.

'Fact is,' was the solemn truth with which Squire Dudley came home after his mental excursion, 'I never ought to have married. See how it ties a man at the most important crisis of his life!'

Having arrived at which pleasant conclusion, Arthur reached Palinsbridge, where Ned and a horse awaited him.

As he rode homeward he pondered over and over how he should best 'break the news' to Heather. Any one following his train of reflection might have thought Mrs Dudley was a perfect virago, so

much did her husband dread her reception of the intelligence that he had accepted the secretaryship, and meant, for the future, to reside in London.

Almost he wished he had asked Mr Black to come down and make the communication for him. He knew Heather would not scold, or nag, or strive to render him miserable about the matter, but he knew also she would feel hurt at his reserve, his secrecy, his want of trustfulness.

Long ago she had asked him not to let them drift away one from the other—what had she meant by that? Was it possible Heather should ever become reserved towards him? that her love should ever grow less? her devotion ever dwindle and die away altogether? Was what his aunt had told him at Copt Hall true? —‘You will not be able to retain Heather’s affection for ever, Arthur, if you give her none in return. You have got a wife such as no man ever found before; take care lest you sustain a loss such as no man ever can repair.’

What did it mean? Arthur Dudley pulled up his horse to a walk, and asked himself this question as he entered Berrie Down Lane.

He had heard men say they never valued a mother’s love till it could be given to them never more. Was this what Miss Hope desired to imply? Did she think Heather delicate? Did she imagine there was any fear of her fading away and leaving him? What would his life be without Heather? Who would ever again bear with him, think for him, love him, like the woman whom he now feared to face,—whom he now rode slowly on to meet, slowly, though he knew she was waiting and watching for his arrival?

What a game of cross-purposes love is altogether! What a stake some people throw down on the board, what despairing losers many walk forth again into the world!

Make your game, gentlemen, make your game, it is all a matter of business! The world must not stand still, even though hearts be broken.

Make your game! The game is made, and here is the result: a great intellect mated to a fool, a fond woman mismatched with a weak, or brutal, or unloving husband!

What, complaining? You played for happiness, and you have

lost. There are other gamblers coming forward—pray stand aside.

Or it is a lottery, and the people come up to draw. Only a doll, only an idiot, a shrew, a tyrant, a faithless husband, a coquettish wife, a plausible pretender: a woman all paint and padding, all affectation and extravagance,—a man polished enough in his manners, yet coarse and repulsive in the ordinary course of every-day domestic life!

And you grumble? Pray, Sir, and Madam, did you not pay your money and take your chance? Have you not drawn *something* out of the matrimonial lottery? It does not suit you? Oh! we can have no exchanges here! there are your goods, take them. 'Here's a lottery in which no man draws a blank!' and so forth till the end of time; so forth, while the men and the women go home with their purchases, and shrine them or curse them, according as the goods suit or their tempers incline.

What a game of cross-purposes! what a lottery of incongruous chances! What a singular thing that Arthur and Heather should ever have married! What a still more marvellous affair, that only after the years, the possibility should occur to him of her affection weakening, of her love decaying!

What an awful mistake it is men and women alike make, when they imagine that because love has been, love will be, always!

As though there were any human attachment which constant dropping could not wear away; as though the devotion existed which neglect and distrust, unkindness and coldness, would not ultimately alienate!

Can the tendrils go on for ever feeling after a support which is removed from them? Will there not come a day when they will either wither away, or otherwise turn elsewhere for something around which to twine? Was that what Miss Hope meant? or did she only intend to imply that one day, when he wanted the love, and the help, and the companionship he now spurned, he should stretch forth his hands in vain to meet only vacancy?

Strange things often ride beside a man, keep his company in the night watches, walk with him along the familiar paths; strange things the ghosts of 'what has been,' the shadows of 'what is to be;' and it was most probably a mixture of both these phantoms

that caused Squire Dudley to spur his horse, shying in the moonlight—on—and to push forward more rapidly under the elms and the beeches, beside the hedgerows, bare of flower and leaf, across the gleaming brook—home.

Where Heather was waiting for him with the old glad look of welcome in her face, with the soft pleading tone in her voice, with the half-timid touch laid on his shoulder, ‘so pleased to see him home again,’ she said; ‘so thankful to be able to tell him Lally was better—much better, and she herself quite rested. Had he been well, and had he settled his business satisfactorily? He was seated before the fire by this time with his top-coat off and his feet stretched out towards the warmth.

He was at home, and the little bustle of arrival over. The inevitable moment had come at last—the moment when, if he ever were to tell his wife of the impending change, the communication must be made.

And yet, looking round, it did seem hard to break up that pleasant home, to leave the familiar places, and strive to set up the household gods of Berrie Down on a strange shrine—in strange niches.

The shadows which had pursued him up the Lane must have entered at the open door and sat down beside the Squire, for there was something, not merely of dread, but also of regret, in his heart, when turning, he said to Heather,—

‘I have news for you.’

‘Good news,’ she said; ‘anything about Bessie?’

‘No, nothing to do with any one but ourselves. As for whether my news be good or bad, I cannot tell, for that will depend somewhat on how you take it. What should you say if I told you I had added a thousand a year to our income?’

‘I should say it was almost too good to be true,’ she answered.

‘But it is true,’ he said, ‘only there is one drawback—we must leave Berrie Down.’

‘Leave Berrie Down!’ she repeated.

‘I do not mean leave it entirely,’ he explained; ‘but still, for a considerable part of each year, it will be necessary for us to reside in town. We shall have a large house there, rent free, and—

‘Tell me what it all means, Arthur,’ she said, interrupting his confused sentence. ‘Begin at the beginning, and explain it to me. Where is this thousand a year coming from? Why is it necessary we should live in town?’

She knelt down beside him as she spoke: knelt down, and leaning her elbows on the arm of the chair he occupied, looked up in his face, with those lovely, pleading, sad eyes, that had still the brooding sorrow in them.

For the first time, that expression struck Arthur painfully; that expression of all not being happy in her life, which it is so bitter a thing to behold in the face of any one near and dear to us; that expression of terrible though almost unconscious loneliness, which is so pitiful, so pathetic, we can scarcely look upon it without tears.

Once more let me paint her for you as she kneels there in the firelight,—let me paint her in the very prime of her womanhood, with the rich warm tints of her hair contrasting against her clear white skin, with her small ears peeping out from below the heavy braids which were wreathed round and round her head, with her face uplifted towards Arthur, her lips parted, her hands clasped, and that pleading look in her eyes—that look which had in it something of a dumb appeal—of an entreaty, which, although the heart could conceive, the tongue refused to utter.

Before he could answer her, Arthur had to turn his head away, and fix his eyes on the dancing firelight. Passing through the world’s long picture-gallery, it is oftentimes not the great paintings, not the court ceremonials, not the huge sea pieces, not the representations of battle-fields, not the important portraits and the historical incidents, which are photographed on our memories, which are stamped on our mental retina so indelibly, that through the years they are never forgotten. It is not the large finished pictures which we went out to see, which we took, perhaps, much notice of at the time, that stay with us and remain in our memories longest; rather it is the figure of some beggar child, the little glimpse of woodland scenery, the barren bleakness of some desolate moor, the hopeless languor of a dying man’s hand,—these are the trifles which, God knows why, we carry away with us. The scenes of great account at which we

have been present, on which we have gazed, in which, perchance, we have been actors, pale and fade away from the canvas of our brains ; but so long as memory remains, there are slight gestures and passing expressions which recur to us again and again, and which will recur, till life leave us and the mould be heaped up over the spot where we lie.

The tone of a voice, the look in a face, the pressure of a hand, a chance word spoken in love or in anger, a stray sentence in a book—these things stay with us when, to our thinking, weightier matters are forgotten, when the passions and the sorrows, the struggles and the successes of the years departed have come to be in our recollections but as a flower which has bloomed—a leaf which has faded.

Many a time in the after-days, when all the important events and exciting interviews of that period of his life had become blurred and indistinct, there would rise up before Arthur Dudley's mental sight a vision of a woman kneeling beside him in the fire-light, of a soft, tender voice entreating him to tell her all—of white hands clasped tightly, in mute supplication—of eyes uplifted, pleading for a fuller confidence, for more perfect faith and love.

Did he give her any one of the things she thus silently asked for? Ah! it is hard for a man who has started on a wrong road to retrace his steps ; it is well-nigh impossible for any one who has been led on and on, from less to more, from little to much, to go back to the beginning, and explain circumstantially how he has gradually become entangled, deeper and deeper ; how, meaning to put forth for only a short sail, he has drifted away to lands he never intended visiting—to shores where he encountered strange people and formed undesirable acquaintances, destined to change the whole course of his life, to make a difference in his career here, and, it may be—who can tell?—in his state hereafter.

So he was not frank, and the chance of a full and free understanding between the husband and wife ebbed back among the waves, to be restored by them no more.

He told her precisely what he had determined to tell : he said he had been offered the secretaryship ; that he considered it too good a proposal to refuse, and so he closed with it at once. He

was eloquent concerning the relief such a salary must bring ; he described all the advantages a residence in town would ensure ; was fluent about the house in Lincoln's Inn Fields—the wide staircase, the lofty rooms, the airy situation, the pleasant gardens of the Square ; and then he wound up by saying, that the only drawback to his perfect happiness and contentment in the matter, was his fear lest Heather should object to living in town—lest, being so much attached to Berrie Down, she should dislike leaving it.

As he said this he took courage and turned and looked at her, and, behold ! the sad, lonely expression was gone, and another, more difficult, perhaps, to analyze, had come in its place.

‘Arthur,’ she answered, and the low, sweet voice—in which, as I wrote once before, there was a great virtue of leisure—was broken neither by sorrow nor passion, as she spoke, ‘I love Berrie Down much, but I love you better. I had not seen this place when I married you. You need not be afraid of it parting us now.’

And that was all ! The dreaded confession was made, and this was how she took it. Could anything have been quieter, calmer, more satisfactory ? Yes ; if she had been vexed and angry, Arthur could have understood her better. If she had cross-questioned him, and uttered reproaches about his not having previously made a confidante of her, he would have escaped that sense of something being amiss which fell like ice upon his heart.

He could not know what a world of feeling was contained in the short sentence she had uttered. How should he know ? this man who never took his wife in his arms, when she said she loved him better than Berrie Down ; nor told how she was more to him than houses and lands—than gold and silver ; who allowed her to rise from the ground and stand looking steadfastly into the fire, and only marvelled what she could be thinking of—where on earth her mind was wandering.

Already that scene was for both of them a thing of the past ; already the lichens and the mosses of memory were growing around, and taking the fresh bareness off it, destroying the harshness of the cold, grey outline.

But half an hour before, and the news had still to be imparted ; and now the tidings were told and received and all difficulty was over ; all doubt of her concurrence removed.

Down the gallery of Time already the footsteps of the past were echoing, carrying away that scene from memory, in order to fling it into the lumber-room containing life's unused opportunities.

It had been with him but a moment before to be employed as a shield and a buckler, as a safeguard from trouble, as a sword against the enemy ; and, behold, the man was so blind, so feeble, so incompetent, as to let it slip from his fingers, and glide away to be seized and borne off, and recalled no more, save in sorrowful memories with unavailing regrets.

For when return to the land is impossible, even the most reckless will perceive the extent of the danger he has courted, and stretch forth his hands despairingly towards that fair shore which is receding from his gaze for ever.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LEAVING BERRIE DOWN.

THE programme of domestic arrangements which Arthur Dudley had so ingeniously sketched out, as he travelled from London to Palinsbridge, was, like many other programmes, destined to undergo much revision before being presented to the public.

In the first place, Mrs Piggott's prudence, or possibly, even her morality, objected to being left alone with Ned at Berrie Down in charge of that establishment. A house without a mistress had always been Mrs Piggott's special abhorrence,—a house where things, as she said, 'ran wild.'

Further, Mrs Dudley most earnestly desired that if her lot were to be cast in town, it should not be cast there in company with strange servants ; and, after much anxious discussion, it was accordingly agreed that Susan should take Mrs Piggott's position, and

a new housemaid be engaged to fill Jane's place, while Prissy and Jane and Mrs Piggott accompanied the family to London. As an almost necessary consequence of this arrangement, it was decided that Agnes and Laura should remain at the Hollow; Agnes willingly undertaking to 'see to things' as much as possible, and write Heather an account of the farm proceedings every week.

Ned, of course, was to take charge of out-door matters, as hitherto; and Lucy and Cuthbert were to proceed to town.

It seemed to Mr Black, when he heard these various decisions, that the whole family must suddenly have taken leave of their senses.

'Why the deuce you could not have put in a care-taker, and sold the cows, and got rid of all the poultry, and let that Ned fellow see to the ploughing and sowing, passes my comprehension. The girls will never get married down there; why, I don't suppose they see a man from one year's end to another?'

'There is one of them coming up, remember,' said Arthur Dudley, in a tone of apology, as though some excuse were necessary for putting his sisters in the way of matrimonial chances; 'and Heather and they settled it, somehow, amongst them. It appeared to be rather a good arrangement.'

'Well, it may be, if you wish to have them on your hands for ever,' answered Mr Black; at which remark Arthur bit his lip.

He did not like being interfered with, or advised overmuch. If he wished his sisters to stay at Berrie Down, what business was it of Mr Black's whether they remained there or not? He had maintained them when no other member of the family could or would have done so, and he did not see that any person had a right to make comments on what he did or left undone.

'You need not look crusty, Squire,' proceeded Mr Black; 'what I said is merely my opinion, and you may take it for what it is worth; only I consider it to be a confoundedly bad plan to have two establishments, and so I tell you. I would shut up Berrie Down, and move the whole party, bag and baggage, to town. That is what I should do; but, of course, you can do as you like.'

'Yes; and that is what I intend to do: much obliged, at the same time, for your kind permission.'

‘Hoity-toity!’ said Mr Black, taking off his hat, and bowing low as he spoke;—it was in one of the empty rooms of Arthur’s house in Lincoln’s Inn Fields that this conversation occurred,—‘hoity-toity! your most obedient, sir, and humbly beg pardon for the liberty.’

In a pet, Arthur turned away, and walking to one of the windows, looked out over the Square, while Mr Black regarded him with a smile, in which there lurked not only amusement, but also triumph and contempt.

‘You’re a nice chicken, you are,’ thus ran the promoter’s secret thought; ‘and you have a sweet temper, Mister Squire Dudley; and you think you are able to manage your affairs, though anybody, willing to take the trouble, might put a ring through your nose, and lead you from here to Jericho. And so you intend to do as you like! It will be as *I* like before we have done with one another, I fancy; a conceited, upsetting ass!’

But Mr Black was much too wise a man to allow even a word of all this to pass his lips. He had his game still to play; and he would not mar the chances of success by any irritated or indiscreet remark.

‘Come, Dudley,’ he said, ‘we are not going to quarrel over trifles, are we? I meant no offence, and am sorry if you have taken any. I have knocked about the world too much to be as mealy-mouthed as most of your acquaintances, but I should be as sorry to vex you, perhaps, as any of them. I am glad you like the papers I have chosen; you will find everything in apple-pie order when you bring up Mrs Dudley and the children. So your wife is going to try moving Miss Lally? I am glad of it; I believe she will get well in half the time in town.’

That was what Heather trusted also; she hoped that some of the great doctors in London would be able to do more for her little girl in a month than the general practitioner at Fifield had effected in five. Every one told her she was doing the wisest thing possible in taking Lally to town! every one was so kind and good!

Mrs Poole Seymour sent her carriage to convey mother and child to the station, and Mr Plimpton was at Palinsbridge, ready to

conduct Lally across the bridge, and deposit her safely in the compartment he had secured for the travellers.

Miss Baldwin promised to call upon the girls 'very often,' and said she should not 'forget to find her way to Lincoln's Inn when in town;' while Mrs Raidsford came lumbering over in the great family chariot, and, not to be outdone in neighbourly thoughtfulness and delicate consideration, brought Heather a basket of the worst grapes growing in the Moorlands conservatory, and offered to lend her 'one of the footmen,' if he could be of any service in seeing to her luggage.

It was fortunate for Heather she had, towards the last, so many people to see, so many things to occupy and distract her mind, or else that parting from Berrie Down, when the spring flowers were budding, when the fresh leaves were clothing all the trees, when the birds were singing on every branch and bough, must almost have broken her heart.

She loved the spring-time—that time which always seems more full of hope, and joy, and life, and promise than any other period in the year. It had been her delight, ever since she came to Berrie Down, to watch the buds gradually forming, to peep with the children at the nests, where eggs, speckled, and blue, and white, and green, were covered by birds that rarely took fright at sight of the familiar faces; to her, the lambing season was the pleasantest of the four—the long, long summer stretched away beyond the spring, and the rich, glowing autumn beyond that, and all these good things were to be had and enjoyed before the winter, with its leafless trees, with its snows and frosts, with its rain and storms, came again to Berrie Down.

To any person passionately fond of the country, of its sights, and sounds, and pleasures, the coming of spring is as the beginning of a feast, as the sunrise on the morning of a bright glad holiday. To Heather, this had always been the happiest, most delicious time at Berrie Down—these months when the lambs commenced to dot the fields, when the daisies perked up their faces among the green grass, when the hyacinths began to bud in the dells, when the 'sunny celandine' opened on the hedge-bank, when the chil-

dren gathered branches of the crab-apple, when the first brood of chickens chipped their shells and went chirruping and scratching about the warmest corners of the farm-yard—when the sun really had some power, when the fruit-trees were in blossom and the lilacs showed for flower, when the tiger-lily reared its head in the garden, when every hedge-row was clad in its fresh robe of green, and there was that nameless scent of spring pervading the air—that scent with which the summer odours vainly strive to compete.

With a new sense of happiness upon her, with a sensuous delight in the soft balmy air, in the fragrance which pervaded the atmosphere, in the sunny smile which shone on the face of Nature, in the sudden stir which there seemed on every bough, in every blade of grass—Heather, I say, when all the things I have mentioned came to pass, would stand at the open window of the drawing-room, looking down over the Hollow, and away to the woods surrounding Kemms' Park, repeating to herself the while—

'The winter is past—the rain is over and gone—the flowers appear on the earth—the time for the singing-birds is come—and the voice of the turtle is heard in the land.'

And now this time was come, and she had to leave it behind.

Just when the hawthorn-buds were forming—when the chestnut-trees were clothing themselves in great masses of foliage, to be relieved presently and lighted up with cone after cone of pure white flowers—when the laburnums were about loosening their golden curls, and the lilacs bethought themselves of filling the air with a delicious fragrance—when the westeria was hanging out its purple clusters, and the pyracanthas at the gate were a perfect sheet of bloom—when the white anemone and the starry stitchwort dotted the woods—when everything was looking its loveliest, and brightest, and purest, Heather was compelled to leave the place her heart had grown to during the years of her married life.

For some time previously, Arthur had been resident in town; but Mrs Dudley, having many preparations to make, many arrangements to complete, remained at Berrie Down, not merely until the spring blossoms were come, but also until Lally was sufficiently recovered to travel.

The child still kept weakly and delicate; her once tireless limbs now refused to carry her for any long period. If she started to run along one of the garden walks, she soon returned to her mother with, 'Carry me, please—legs ache.' The colour did not return to her cheeks, nor strength to her body, neither did she get plump and soft again, as Heather hoped would have been the case.

The poor wasted arms, and little white face, and thin slight figure, had a pleading pitifulness about them, which the child's eager desire for exercise, her unquenched vivacity, made more pathetic still.

Whatever Lally saw any other creature doing, that she desired to essay also. She wanted to run after the lambs, and scamper like the dogs, and be out over the fields with Cuthbert, and trotting behind Agnes and Mrs Piggott, to dairy, and poultry-yard, and paddock; but it was not to be! The spirit was there—strong, restless, excitable as ever; but the body was changed. No more gallops for Lally on any one's shoulder—no more charming excursions in Ned's wheelbarrow—no more clambering up ladders, and lofty thrones on the top of hay-stacks and corn-ricks—no more playing at hide-and-seek in the hollow—no more running after the ducks, and shrill laughter at seeing them take to the water in order to escape the pursuit of their tiny persecutor—no more searchings after hens that had stolen away to lay—no more of these old happinesses for Lally. Sickness had caught her one day, when his advent was least looked for—caught and put her in a cage, which would not permit her to move far in any direction, against the bars of which the little restless heart fluttered and beat only to its own hurt—a cage from which no human hand could release her, though loving friends were all around, and kindly eyes, often with tears in them, regarded the impatient child.

Tired—tired—always tired! Many and many a time, when Heather, hearing this plaint, lifted her child in her arms, she had to turn aside lest Lally should see she was weeping; but one day Lally, peeping round, beheld the tears on her mother's face, and said—

'Oo crying, ma?—is it about Lally? Big, fat lady told Lally

she'll get some-sing when she goes to London, that will make her better as well. When are we going, ma—when ?'

And because her own hopes were identical with Lally's words, Mrs Dudley did not grieve so much concerning leaving Berrie Down as might otherwise have been the case. As regarded the increase of income, the prospect of greater pecuniary comfort, Heather felt no elation whatever.

If Arthur were satisfied, she could easily make herself satisfied also ; but she had little faith that anything in which Mr Black figured as prime mover would ultimately prove advantageous to her husband.

Besides, if a person have half a million a year, he can but be happy ; and Heather knew perfectly well that the secret of being happy, even on two hundred a year, is to be satisfied therewith.

Arthur had never been contented, and she was quite aware that the increase to his income could not make him so. She understood her husband's peculiarities sufficiently by this time to know that his wants would only grow with what they fed on.

If Mr Black's cry were always more capital, Arthur's had always been a larger revenue.

Looking back over her married life with eyes from which the glamour of early love was now completely cleared away, Heather saw that money matters might have been better with them for years past, had Arthur only been energetic, and strong, and determined, like other men—had he finished his draining instead of leaving it half completed—had he turned up his land and laid out money by degrees, as he could spare it, on that which never proves ungrateful for capital wisely expended, for care judiciously bestowed.

She could not be blind to the fact that, as a rule, they had bought stock dear and sold it cheap—that what Alick had often said, 'Arthur is neither master nor man : neither master to give orders and see them carried out, nor man to obey orders if given by anybody else,' was true.

There was no fairy mist hanging before her mental vision now. Like Mr Stewart, she feared the person who could not make money at Berrie Down, plainly and economically as they had lived for

years. would not be likely to make or to keep much money elsewhere. Certainly the thousand a year was something tangible—a peg on which to hang her faith, had any faith been left ; but, like most women who have passed all the most important years of their lives in the country, Heather entertained a perfect horror of the expenses of living in town.

She did not believe one sentence of what Mr Black said about an income going as far there as in the country. She knew, no one better, how very small a money outlay had sufficed to maintain the family at Berrie Down comfortably and respectably.

Those only who have eaten of the fat of their own lands, and beheld the wheat growing which is afterwards to be ground into flour—who have scarcely missed from amongst the rough abundance of all farm produce, the poultry and milk, the butter, eggs, hams, vegetables, and meat necessary for the consumption even of a large family—can tell what a very difficult thing it is to cater for an establishment in town, where everything, to the country imagination, seems sold according to its weight in gold—where a housekeeper's hand is never out of her pocket from one week's end to another—where it is either bills or cash, but, in any case, ultimately money—where even a few sprigs of parsley, even a bunch of savoury herbs, cannot be procured without purchase, without going through the ceremony of buying that which, at the old home, grew wild, almost, along the sunniest borders—wild, to be had for the mere trouble of gathering.

Of that mongrel country life which exists in the suburbs of great towns, and which has given rise to various sayings concerning home-laid eggs at a shilling a-piece, carrots at half-a-guinea the bunch, butter half-a-crown a pound, and milk eighteen-pence a quart, Heather had no experience. She only knew that her father's glebe lands and Arthur's farm had enabled their respective families to make both ends meet, without pinching in the parlour, or an overstrict and painful economy in the kitchen ; and she dreaded entering on what was to her an utterly untried career—that of managing a town establishment, and entering every item, from cream to laundry work, in her formerly easily-kept housekeeping book.

All these matters she had discussed, after a woman's diffuse fashion, with Agnes and Mrs Piggott; and Agnes and Mrs Piggott had both agreed that much might still be forwarded from Berrie Down; that it would only be Ned's time and the pony's to run over to Palinsbridge with a weekly hamper for town; 'and besides, you will be often down yourself, I hope, Heather,' added Agnes; but Heather shook her head.

'The expense,' she said, 'will be more than I should like to incur frequently. I am afraid, although a thousand a year sounds a great deal, it will not go very far in London, more especially in the style Arthur talks of living.'

'But his shares, you know, Heather?' suggested Agnes, hopefully.

'Yes, I had forgotten them,' was the reply, evidently intended to be affirmative of the girl's cheerful views, but failing of its purpose, because Mrs Dudley's tone implied that, now she did remember the shares, her spirits were not unduly raised.

She had heard too many revelations from Mrs Black to be mightily exalted at the idea of being even indirectly connected with a company. That lady had favoured her with too many descriptions of how they had 'up and down,' 'seeing and sawing,' for Mrs Dudley's heart to flutter at the prospect of wealth suddenly spread out before them.

'If it was here to-day, it was gone to-morrow,' Mrs Black had sadly lamented; 'and while it was here, we had nothing but anxiety; and when it was there, we had a trouble to keep the wolf from the door. I am sure, my dear, what I have gone through would make a history.'

Heather Dudley not having the slightest desire to go through experiences sufficiently varied and unpleasant to justify any one compiling a history concerning her, would, had the choice been offered, decidedly have preferred remaining where there was no chance of such ups and downs as Mrs Black mentioned occurring in her life.

The choice, however, not being offered, she had at last no alternative left but to bid adieu to Berrie Down; and, accompanied by Miss Hope, who kindly came up from Tunbridge Wells to 'see

the last' of her old favourite drive over to Palinsbridge, whence she travelled by one of the afternoon trains to London.

'I told you how it would be,' said that Job's comforter, Alithea Hope, spinster, as she and Mrs Dudley drove along the pleasant country roads to the station—Heather crouched up into one corner of Mrs Seymour's carriage, so that her child might lie on the seat with her head resting on her mother's lap—'I told you how it would be, if you refused to take my advice; and now I hope you are satisfied at the result of your non-interference principle. Sweetness, and amiability, and submission, and all that kind of thing, are delightful traits, no doubt, in a wife, but they are qualities thrown away on Arthur Dudley—and so you will find out some day. The kindest thing you could have done to your husband would have been to say :

"Now, look here, Arthur: if you are resolved to make a fool of yourself, I won't make a fool of myself with you. Go to town if you like, but I stay at Berrie Down. If you are determined to take the bread out of your children's mouths, I am equally resolved we shall not all be left paupers, if I can prevent it; therefore, I mean to remain and manage the farm, and whenever you are tired of your shares and your companies, and your Blacks and your town life, you can come home again."

Heather laughed; she was a little hysterical about leaving Berrie Down and all the kind friends she had recently found there, and so even while she laughed the tears came into her eyes again.

The idea of her making such a speech to Arthur; of her taking such a stand and setting her will up in open defiance of his; of her twitting her husband with his decision, and prophesying failure for him! Heather could not choose but laugh, and then she cried; and then Miss Hope told her she was a soft, silly, stupid creature, who had no more business to marry Arthur Dudley than Mr Raidsford had to marry that great vulgar illiterate dowdy, who 'came over in her caravan to see you this morning; you don't want me to speak about Mrs Raidsford before Lally,—is that the meaning of all those signs? The sooner Lally is taught to repeat nothing she hears, the better; the sooner little girls learn their

mouths and ears were given them to be kept tight shut, the more sugar-plums will be bought and popped in between their little red lips. Are you attending to me, Lally ?

‘Iss ; but how’s me to eat sugar-plums if I keeps mows shut ?’ inquired Miss Hope’s pupil.

‘You are to open it at proper times,’ answered her teacher ; ‘but not to repeat what older people say before you.’

‘Lally don’t ’peat,’ replied the child, wearily. ‘Ma, is it far to London now ? will it be long before we are there ? me so tired—me so tired !’

Whereupon mother and aunt looked at each other, and Miss Hope said,—

‘You will send for a doctor soon, Heather ; and do try that delightful man I was speaking to you about. His manner with children is quite charming : wins their little hearts, and makes them feel at home with him directly. I am sure, when I went to him with Mrs Walter Hope about her Charlie’s legs, if he had been the boy’s father he could not have taken more interest in his case ; said he must see him at least once a week, for six months ; took the child on his knee, and made himself so pleasant. There was only one stupid remark he made, which surprised me in so clever a man, namely, that he could tell in a moment whose child Charlie was, his likeness to his mother being remarkable. I longed to ask him where his eyes were, for the boy is a Hope every inch of him, and very like me,—even his own father admits that.’

Heather laughed again ; she was evidently in a laughing mood, for the slightest thing provoked her merriment. Perhaps it was a comfort to this ‘silly goose’ to discover that even Miss Hope had her weak points, and could be touched through them like her neighbours ; perhaps the description of Charlie’s model doctor tickled her fancy ; any way she laughed ; and Lally, putting up her little hand, patted her mother’s cheek, and smiled a weak, faint smile in sympathy, while she asked,—

‘Ma, was that ’tild as ill as me ?

‘Now I wonder,’ broke out Miss Hope, ‘if it be a consequence of “original sin” that children always speak bad grammar. Is it the depravity of our human nature which always confounds the

parts of speech, and makes a jumble of the personal pronouns? She never heard bad grammar spoken by any one belonging to her, and only listen to her English; if you can call such a language as she speaks English. You want to know if Charlie was as ill as "me,"' added the spinster, directly addressing Lally; 'yes; and a great deal worse; his legs were like a bow, bent out like that;' and Miss Hope would have practically demonstrated what Charlie's legs were like on Lally's person, but that the child resisted any such experiments being attempted with her limbs. 'Positively, Heather, you never saw such a sight as the child was,' she continued; 'but Doctor Chickton assured Fanny he could make a perfect cure.'

'Will he cure me?' asked Lally, egotistical as most sick people are. Months of undivided maternal solicitude, the devotion of a whole household, the visits of ladies vieing one with another who should bring Lally most toys and dainties, had spoiled the child a little, perhaps; or it may be that long illness and a close and undivided consideration of her own ailments, had produced a certain self-consciousness and absorption. In either case, there can be no question but that Lally was exceedingly sorry for herself, that she felt her case to be a very hard one; and that she was precisely in that state of mind and body which might well tire out any love except a mother's, any patience save that which seems well-nigh inexhaustible.

On the previous day Leonard and Lucy, and Cuthbert, together with Mrs Piggott and Priscilla Dobbin, had journeyed to town, and now Heather and her first-born were bringing up the rear of the Dudley domestic army. It was a great point that Heather should have nothing to attend to excepting Lally, that she should not be troubled with luggage or parcels, or anything besides the sick child; and all the others being gone before, was a relief to her, so as to obviate the necessity for conversation or movement, or stir or sound, likely to disturb the little girl.

Mr Plimpton, one of the most good-natured men who ever existed, saw Mrs Dudley into her compartment, and impressed the guard with the importance of permitting no other passengers to intrude into it.

‘The child is very ill indeed,’ he explained ; which explanation he perhaps made clearer by slipping half-a-crown into the man’s hand.

‘I declare, if it were not that Lady Emily might wonder what had become of me, I would run up to town with you myself, Mrs Dudley, and see you safe ; but I think the guard will take care that no other passengers get in. Good-bye—good-bye, Miss Lally ; don’t quite forget me, though you are going to live in London. Have you any message for my wife ? she will be certain to inquire whether you sent her one.’

‘Lally’s love give her,’ said the child, who was now all excitement at the bustle, and the noise, and the steam, and the number of the people, and the general variety,—‘Lally’s love—and a tiss ;’ and she kissed the tall gentleman, spite of his bushy whiskers and bristling moustache, both articles which ordinarily tried her equanimity and temper not a little.

‘That child will never be better,’ was Mr Plimpton’s summary of Lally’s state on his return home. ‘They may take her where they like, and send for whom they like, but she will never be strong again. Poor Mrs Dudley believes it to be a question of treatment, but I am confident no treatment will ever put the little creature to-rights.’

As for Miss Hope, she drove back to Berrie Down ‘crying like an idiot,’ so she informed Agnes, all the way. ‘Dear me, I wish people would not have children,’ she said ; ‘that Lally is enough to break a person’s heart. Why cannot she get strong as any other child would ? I declare I am out of patience with her, month after month, and like a bag of bones at the end. ¶And of all things on earth she must set up a lamentation for that Bessie, whom she ought to have forgotten long ago ; asking her mother if they should see her in London, and whether she would not be with them always, and sing to her at night. As if Heather were not vexed enough and sad enough without that ;’ and Miss Hope tossed aside her bonnet, which Laura carried up-stairs, for the spinster was going to stay with the girls for a time, to see how they went on and managed by themselves.

Then came a millennium of ‘Christian cookery,’ and of ‘coffee

fit to be swallowed;' then Miss Hope was in her element,—a mistress over two young mistresses, who obeyed her implicitly, and allowed her to order Susan about as much as she pleased.

But having one's own way is not always conducive to perfect happiness; being monarch of all one surveys does not invariably produce perfect contentment. Even a contest with Mrs Piggott would occasionally have served to break the monotony of being able to do as she pleased, which Miss Hope at length felt to be insupportable; and every day, and a score of times during the course of every day, she repeated that Berrie Down was not Berrie Down without Heather, who, the guard proving faithful to the trust reposed in him, travelled alone to London with Lally, and was met at King's Cross by Alick and Lucy, the former of whom could only say, 'Well, mother, this is a happy change for me,' as he helped her out of the carriage, and walked beside her along the platform, carrying Lally in his arms.

There was no loneliness about that arrival in the great Babylon, even although Arthur could not meet his wife;—for the strong hands which had smoothed her way, and helped her through many a difficulty at Berrie Down, were stretched forth now to guide and guard her through the midst of the human wilderness whither she had come.

CHAPTER XXIV.

NOT QUITE SATISFIED.'

TIME went by once more; not as it had done at Berrie Down, smoothly as a calm river gliding noiselessly to the sea, but swiftly and excitedly, splashing among the stones, dashing between rocks, rushing over slight obstacles, eddying round larger impediments, rapid as a mountain stream speeding to the valley, with as great a roar and hurry and excitement as that wherewith water falls from a vast height into the basin it has through the centuries worn for itself

below. Thus time sped by in London, so rapidly, so like an arrow cleaving the air, that often Heather's breath was almost taken from her by the swiftness and impetuosity of its passage.

And yet the change was not wholly or even partially unpleasant. There is a great adaptability about some natures which makes the work of transplantation easy and pleasant to accomplish. Their roots are not ungrateful ; move them where you will almost, they contrive to extract nourishment from the soil, and put forth their leaves, and their flowers, and their fruits, in the city, as in the field ; in the midst of bricks and mortar, as away in the far country where the air is pure and pleasant.

They take good out of all things, whence good is possible to be extracted ; they are willing to sing songs in a strange land, and will take down their harps and tune them in whatsoever household their lot is cast. The man or woman who enjoys one pleasure keenly, is not likely to be insensible to another ; and therefore, although Heather's first love was her last, still she made herself very contented in London—was amused with the excitement and the variety that surrounded her ; went to concerts and theatres with all the pleasure a young girl might have evinced, and conducted herself, on the whole, not merely to the satisfaction of her husband, but also to that of Mr Black.

Who was now a power not to be despised, a man worth ever so much money, and likely to be worth ever so much more, a man engaged in floating fresh companies, and successful in obtaining grants and concessions, and first refusals, and early information, to an extent which it would be quite outside the province of this story to explain more fully.

He had bought a splendid house out at Ealing, and was fitting it up regardless of expense. In Stanley Crescent he gave the most wonderful parties that it had ever entered into Mrs Dudley's imagination to conceive could be given by any one not possessed of a ducal revenue. She had thought the furniture in Lincoln's Inn Fields far and away more expensive than any Mr Black should have persuaded Arthur into purchasing, but the promoter assured her it was 'all right ; upon his sacred word of honour, it had not cost a sixpence more than Dudley was perfectly justified in

spending.' And when she beheld Adamant House, as Mr Black's new house at Ealing was happily called, she thought if one of the chiefs of the Company could afford such magnificence, their own, by comparison, modest establishment, could not be considered 'over-timbered,' to quote from the promoter's vocabulary over again.

From room to room she walked, dazzled and bewildered, and Mr Black walked beside, enjoying her astonishment, and kindly acting as cicerone to her inexperienced country understanding.

'Now, is not this better than grubbing on?' he triumphantly inquired, when, seated in his carriage, they were driving back to Lincoln's Inn. 'This is what a man can do who is not afraid, who feels his own strength, and is sure of being able to keep his feet under him. Ay, and by Jove, Dudley shall do as well yet as I have done! He deserves to do well, and so do you, Mrs Dudley; for a more sensible woman, and one less under the dominion of prejudice, I never met. Many a wife would have striven to keep Dudley back—to dissuade him from coming to London, but you were too wise to attempt such interference, and therefore I say you deserve to succeed, and to have every bit as fine a carriage as this to bowl about in.'

Which termination struck Heather as being so intensely ludicrous that she laughed outright, laughed even while she thought gravely enough that, had her interference been likely to produce the slightest good result, she would never have refrained from attempting it. This little explanation, however, being quite unnecessary to offer to Mr Black, she took his compliment as though she deserved it every word, and laughed while the promoter thought, in his own elegant language, 'that he had got to the blind side of Mrs Dudley also, and would be shortly able to wind her round his finger as he had done the Squire.'

In those early days, Arthur Dudley certainly proved himself to be as foolish and confiding a gentleman as any rogue need have desired to meet with.

Although he saw the grand house at Ealing, although every morning Mr Black, *en route* to the City, thundered up to the door of the Protector Company's offices in his carriage and pair, and

swaggered and blustered about the place as though the clerks, and the secretary, and the cashier, and the whole concern, in fact, were his own personal and exclusive property, still Arthur never insisted on a settlement of their accounts, never objected to renew bills, never made any difficulty about accepting new ones. He believed implicitly every sentence Mr Black told him, and had much greater faith in the promoter's genius than in that of his own especial principal, Mr Stewart, who, having put in a secretary and cashier of his own choosing, now rarely came near the office excepting on special board days, and when he paid formal visits to Mrs Dudley, who always received him with the uncomfortable feeling, that if he knew who she really was, his calls would be fewer and shorter still.

But at length there came a certain coolness between the promoter and the secretary, which commenced in this wise:—

‘Now I tell you what it is, Dudley,’ said Mr Black, one day when, for the third time, his kinsman's renewals had been required and effected; ‘I tell you what it is,—this paper of yours has been through the fire often enough, it will never do to run it on till it gets scorched. You don't know what I mean, I see, but it is just this: a girl may walk out with a man once, and people think nothing about it—they may have met by accident, no consequence—but if she goes on walking, talk begins, there is some game up. Now, a man's credit is much in the same position. He may renew once or twice, and nobody thinks anything strange of his doing so; if he continue renewing, however, his name gets blown upon, and banks begin—especially if he be in no business—to look askance on his paper. That is your position at the present time; you must not ask for more discount, or, at least, if you do, you will not get it. I have done my best for you this time, and so has Crossenham, but I am greatly afraid we shall not be able to get you passed again.’

‘Then I suppose you will take up the bills next time?’ suggested Arthur.

‘I have no objection to taking up those that I have had value for,’ answered Mr Black, a little astonished, perhaps, at Arthur's so speedily discovering the weak point in his armour; ‘but what

are you to do with yours? That is the important part of the business, is it not?’

‘I do not know,’ Arthur replied; ‘I should have supposed one part of it to be about as important as the other.’

‘Well, you would have supposed wrong, then,’ retorted Mr Black; ‘because, though I am deucedly short, and shall be short for the next twelvemonth, still I could make a pinch of meeting my bills; but how you are to take up yours, until the shares become marketable, I confess puzzles me to imagine—unless, indeed, you decide to raise a few thousands on Berrie Down.’

‘A few thousands!’ repeated Arthur, in amazement, ‘a few thousands! Why, my bills altogether cannot amount to more than a few hundreds!’

‘Don’t they, by Jove!’ said Mr Black, coolly. ‘Just run your eye over that little list—there is not sixpence of mine among it, —and you will soon change your opinion. You have had a lot of money, one time and another. Then you bought this place; then there is the discount.’

‘I thought you were going to pay that?’ Arthur interrupted.

‘On those which were drawn for my accommodation, of course,’ replied Mr Black. ‘I am now talking of yours. Then there was the doing up of this house—’

‘You told me the Company would put it in proper order for me to live in,’ once again interposed Mr Dudley.

‘So they would, had it been for any other person excepting the owner of the house,’ answered Mr Black. ‘I had, as I told you, to waive that point. I wrote you all about it after you were up at the beginning of the year.’

‘Indeed, you are mistaken,’ said Arthur; ‘you never wrote a syllable to me on the subject!’

‘All I can say is, then, that I either wrote or intended to write,’ answered Mr Black; ‘but I had such a deuce of a lot of things to attend to about that time, your letter may have slipped my memory. However that’s nothing to do with what we are talking of now. If you will consider the affair, it was absurd to expect the Company both to pay you rent and to paint and paper your house. They could not do it. I forgot about its being your own property—

about your, in fact, being landlord and our being tenants, till you were back at Berrie Down. We pay you a very good rent, so you must not be dissatisfied. Then, you see, there is the furniture.'

'Good Heavens!' exclaimed Arthur, 'you never mean to say that the furniture we have in this house cost twelve hundred and seventy-eight pounds? Where could twelve hundred and seventy-eight pounds' worth be put?'

'My dear fellow, how you talk?' said Mr Black, with a smile of infinite superiority, 'why, you might put double the money up in a corner and scarcely see it! Most economical I call the whole arrangement. You have a drawing-room fit to ask anybody into, a grand trichord thingumygig of Erard's, good solid chairs and tables, every room fully carpeted, dinner and dessert services complete, glasses large enough for Buckingham Palace, bed-chambers that you need not mind putting a duke to sleep in—all for twelve hundred odd pounds.

'But that is more than a year's income,' Arthur persisted.

'I beg your pardon—taking rent and everything, it is not nearly a year's income; but, even if it were, the man who can rig a house up like this for a twelve-months' pay, is a very fortunate fellow. I told you I would not run you to a farthing's unnecessary expense, and neither I did. In your position here, in London, it would not do for you to have the same old-fashioned curiosities that served your purpose very well at Berrie Down; besides, the money is not lost, there is the furniture—well kept, it would fetch its cost any day by auction; now tot up those items, and let us see the sum total. Yes; that is just what I made it, running through the account roughly—four thousand six hundred and eleven pounds, seventeen shillings, and nine pence.'

'Mr Black! I never had that sum of money,' said Arthur, excitedly.

'If you had not money, you had goods,' answered Mr Black; 'but you have had a smartish' sum of money too. The pace you have gone at the last twelvemonth has not been a slow one. Those dinners you gave—and the money you spent in town—'

'But you said the Company would pay all that.'

'So it has; you have your shares and your salary, and your

good rent for these premises. I never meant direct payment. The idea is absurd. How would an entry like this sound :

“Dinner at the Wellington, to six desirable City men,” or “Treating Cadger’s managing clerk to the theatre, with supper after,” or “Stall tickets to the Misses Smithers,” or “Half a sov. to Jenkins’ footman !” Just bring the thing home, Dudley ; think how ridiculous it would sound, and don’t be unreasonable. You have had your penn’orths, and you will have more—besides, it really is this house and furniture, neither of which is likely to run away, that has walked into the money. Think over the matter, will you ? any time during the course of the next two months, and let me know what you decide ;’ and with that, the promoter was airily taking himself out of the room, when ‘Black !’ sharply spoken by his companion, arrested his departure.

‘I never had this money,’ Mr Dudley repeated. ‘I never could have had it ; where has it gone—what has been done with it ?’

‘As for that, Dudley,’ was the reply—‘take my advice, and never waste your time inquiring after spent money. Enough for you, or any man, to know that it has gone—to the tomb of all those people one hears about. No use trying to hold a *post-mortem* examination on the body of a defunct ten-pound note. For the rest, you both could and did have all the sums I have debited you with ; they are regularly entered on their dates of payment in my books. First day you are down in the City, call in and check them off. I’d rather you would do so—more satisfactory for us both.

And with this Parthian shot, Mr Black said ‘Good-day,’ and shut the office-door after him, leaving Arthur far too much perplexed and bewildered to consider that a lie can be written as well as spoken, any day in the year, and that the mere fact of an entry to his debit being made on such and such a date, did not by any means of necessity prove that such debt had ever been incurred.

CHAPTER XXV.

A GLIMPSE OF THE CANVAS.

WHETHER the moneys, with a memorandum of which the promoter so obligingly furnished him, had ever come into his hands or not, Arthur Dudley still felt a certain sense of having been cheated—of having been made the cat's-paw wherewith Mr Black's chestnuts were drawn out of the fire. He knew, although to the letter Mr Black's statements might be correct, still that in the spirit he had deceived him grossly.

He was perfectly well aware the meaning conveyed to him by the Company 'paying all,' was that he, Arthur Dudley, should never have to meet a single bill, nor be a penny the worse for the money he had advanced to float the Protector.

Bitterly now he remembered Nellie and his stock—the latter sold at a considerable sacrifice. The young bullocks and the fat beeves, the flocks of sheep, and the lambs which ought to have been kept over the winter, appeared again, and formed a sad procession before his mind's eye. Hay parted with before the price rose at the turn of the year; wheat threshed off and sent to market, when the markets were falling instead of rising; straw disposed of at rates which scarcely left a margin of profit, after deducting cartage and expenses—these things recurred to the Squire's memory, and roused fresh anger in his heart against the man who had led him so grievously astray.

Now he recollected Mr Stewart's prophetic words, and cursed that gentleman's clear-sightedness as he did so. Now he recalled those sentences—'I am prepared to lose, and you are not;' 'I can afford to wait; you, perhaps, are differently situated;' and they seemed to make his difficulty clear in a moment. 'He was not prepared to lose—he was not able to wait.' He had stretched his arm out farther than he could draw it back; to lose, with him meant ruin; to wait, meant anxiety and distress unutterable.

What should he do? Looking back over the events of the previous twelve months, Squire Dudley lamented his own credulity

and anathematized Mr Black. He did not regret joining the Protector, or accepting the secretaryship, or leaving Berrie Down, but he bit his nails and drummed upon the table, and then, rising, kicked his chair over, and walked up and down the room, while he called himself all the names imaginable for having accepted bills and spent money, and bought the house in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

He had been eager to buy that house the moment Mr Black said it was in the market. He would scarcely take time to look over the premises before closing with the owner, so fearful was he of another purchaser forestalling him ; but he forgot all this now, and worked himself up into the belief that the promoter had given him no rest till the deposit was paid and the deeds were signed.

He had thought himself so clever, and, behold, another hand stretched out beyond his, secured the prize. He had got nothing but a thousand a year and his shares, and he had to work for his thousand a year, do a vast amount more than 'read the *Times*, and talk to people.' He had to write letters, at least dictate them, or else put down the heads which were to be written, and then see that his clerk filled them in properly, which the clerk never did sufficiently well to satisfy Arthur, who, on the whole, declared he found it easier to take the correspondence himself, than 'to try to hammer the sense of what he wanted conveyed, into any other person's stupid head.'

He had to be at the office for a certain number of hours every day, and to see and discourse with hundreds of 'perfect idiots'—shareholders—who, it is only fair to add, went away with the impression that Mr Dudley was far too fine a gentleman to understand anything of the affairs of the Company to which he was secretary.

Further, the directors expected him to know every circumstance connected directly or indirectly with the Protector, whether that circumstance were in his department or not. Especially, there sat on the board a General Sinclair, C.B., who was the very plague and torment of Arthur Dudley's life ; who was always asking for information ; eternally wanting the secretary to 'refer back,' con-

tinually reverting to something which had occurred at the very creation of the Company, and of which the present secretary had no cognizance whatever.

A change this from Berrie Down Hollow ; from doing what he liked, as he liked, without question asked by any one ; a change this from coming and going as he pleased ; from refraining from work ; from wandering idly and purposelessly round the farm.

He detested the work, but he liked the thousand a year ; he could not bear what he called the drudgery of London life, but he delighted in London gaiety, and in that gaiety he had expected to participate without ever having to labour before he enjoyed.

This life which he was leading ; this life—and one a hundred times more agreeable, Mr Black had told him, should be his—for the mere price of Nellie advanced into the Protector, Limited ; and now it was no thanks to Mr Black he was even in London at all ; Mr Stewart had procured him this trashy appointment, which he would have spurned excepting as a stepping-stone to something much better. Everybody had made, and was making, a fortune out of the Company excepting himself, and it was his money which had floated it ; his money which had enabled Mr Black to buy that place at Ealing, and furnish it without a second thought as to the cost !

But in this conclusion, Arthur Dudley—like all people who, reasoning in a passion, reason illogically—chanced to be wrong. His few thousands would have made but a very poor figure when placed to the credit of Mr Black's recent purchases ; they would have been a drop in the ocean, a blade of grass on the prairie, a single crow amongst the occupants of a rookery. Those poor thousands were many for a poor man to lose ; but even had he pocketed every sixpence of the money for which Arthur was responsible, the whole amount would not have tided Mr Black over three months' expenditure.

For in those days he was 'going in for the whole thing.' He meant either to rise or to fall—so he informed the Crossenhams. His companies were now all floated ; some of them, indeed, in course of winding up, and out of each, and all, the promoter either had reaped, or was hoping to reap, largely. He had a dozen irons in

the fire. On the strength of his connection with the Protector, he had suddenly become a man 'looked after' by those who had a 'good thing' in view.

As he had looked after Allan Stewart, so minor promoters now began to look after and solicit him. He dressed as Peter Black, Esquire, had never dressed before. His light summer overcoat was a work of art to be admired by clerks and porters as a 'West End cut'; his boots were articles of attire to be envied; while his hats looked as though they had been that moment taken out of silk paper, and placed jauntily on his head. He had abundant leisure now for attending to the adornment of his outward man, and he did attend to it thoroughly.

The Hoxton days, when he shaved before a piece of broken looking-glass, and performed the very slight ablutions to which he treated his person in a blue Delft washing-basin about six inches in diameter, were left at a convenient distance; and Peter Black, Esquire—quite another individual from the Mister Black who inhabited those wretched lodgings in a street leading out of Pitfield Street, Hoxton—had his house fitted up with hot and cold baths (which he used), while his dressing-table was furnished with as many oils, and scents, and pomades, as might have sufficed to dress up an old beauty for her three thousandth ball.

All of which things Arthur remembered, and was wroth accordingly. Had his money not helped to start the Protector? and had Mr Black not promised to go shares with him? Certainly he had told him as plainly as he could speak that he should have the half of that twenty or thirty thousand pounds he expected to make out of the Company, providing only he lent him in the first instance a hundred pounds!

Arthur Dudley had neither sense enough nor wit enough to perceive the absurdity of this climax. He was awfully stupid, and he had implicitly believed, and here was the result.

He had really thought he should, from one seed, reap immediately a whole field of wheat; he had really credited what a very clever and a very plausible man implied to be the fact, and many a reader will, I know, laugh at him for his credulity, or else scoff at me for drawing the portrait of an impossibly confiding man.

We may presume, and we do presume, of course, that ladies and gentlemen who subscribe to Mudie's would be much cleverer than all this comes to, but still there are other ladies and gentlemen who, taking in the daily papers and reading therein: 'Ten pounds wanted for one week; fifteen pounds will be given for the above at the end of seven days; ample security deposited,' see and believe just as Arthur Dudley heard and believed likewise. Even amongst the ladies and gentlemen who do subscribe to Mudie's, it is most probable there may have been a few who, in times gone by, deluded by plausible circulars, took shares in some of Mr Black's companies, and, as a natural consequence, lost their money; and—since there is no one who speaks so loudly against the errors of his former religion as an apostate—doubtless the individuals to whom I refer will declare Arthur Dudley's credulity to be wicked, if not impossible.

Deferentially I stand aside, while the book is laid down, and the suitable oration delivered; then with all due respect I take up the thread of my story once again, and speak of things which are taking place every day in the City, where fresh dupes come hourly to be fleeced, and fresh shearers, no more tender or scrupulous than Mr Black, attend to relieve the unsuspecting sheep of their superfluous wool.

Arthur Dudley was to have had half!

Remembering this, which in the hurry and confusion of his interview with Mr Black he had forgotten, the secretary took his hat, and walked off to the City.

Sooner than his friend had expected he accepted that gentleman's invitation, and entering the offices in Dowgate Hill, where another company—the 'Universal Law Stationery'—was in course of formation, found the promoter up to his ears in business, with half-a-dozen people waiting to see him.

'Tell Mr Black I will not detain him five minutes,' said Arthur, quite loud enough for the whole congregation to hear, after, it may be remarked, the pleasing fashion of country people in London. 'You know me, don't you?' he added, seeing the clerk hesitate, 'I am the secretary of the Protector Bread Company.'

Thereupon the visitors each drew his own conclusion. Some,

very green indeed, thought what a great man Mr Dudley must be, thus to force himself into the presence of the magnificent director; others, less easily impressionable, decided that a screw had got loose in the Protector, which Mr Black was expected to set right. At all events, they each and all began working out the problem of what the secretary could want with his principal, while Arthur marched into the presence of the great man, and found him not engaged with any individual, but simply writing his letters for post.

'What's up with you?' were his first words; 'has any one come for a million of shares? or is there a fire at Stangate—or—or what the devil brings you into the City at such a time of day as this?'

'Our conversation this afternoon,' Arthur answered, boldly. 'I could not rest; it is not fair, Mr Black; you have not treated me as I should have treated you. Do you remember what you said to me that day when this matter was first mooted between us?'

'Pray sit down,' said Mr Black, magnificently, waving his visitor to a seat, 'and explain your meaning to me quietly, if you can. Do I remember what? we said so many things that day it would be impossible for me to recollect all, or indeed any, of them, unless recalled to my memory.'

'Do you remember what you said about going half profits with me?' Arthur asked.

'I can't say that I do. Were there any profits then to share?'

'Prospective profits,' the other answered. 'You said you expected twenty or thirty thousand pounds of the "Protector," and that whatever you got, you would go shares with me.'

'Did I?' asked Mr Black, innocently. 'I wish, Dudley, you had chosen any other time in the day than this for coming to pester about bygones,' he added, 'for I have no end of letters to write; but, however, as you are here, say all you have got to say.'

'I have nothing to say excepting what I have already said,' answered Arthur, 'namely, that you promised to go shares with me in the Bread Company.'

'Now, that is exactly the objection I have to doing business with a gentleman,' remarked Mr Black; 'it is impossible to make

him understand, excepting literally, a sentence which would be plain as a pikestaff to a boy in the London streets. Tell me the construction you took out of that speech, which, I confess, I never remember to have uttered.'

'You said you would have twenty or thirty thousand out of this bakery affair, and were willing to give me half.'

'Precisely ! not willing to give you half of my earnings, but willing to give you a chance of winning fifteen thousand, which you would have done but for that meddling idiot, Stewart. He has dished me, too, you know. Deuce a thing I have had out of the Company except trouble, my shares, and position. It certainly has given me position. I meant we should have made—you and I together—thousands and thousands out of it, instead of which, when I had served my gentleman's turn, he bows me off with, "The Company won't bear this, and the Company can't afford that. Whatever houses and offices we buy, must be bought on the mart. Our grain shall not be supplied through any friend of yours. I shall put in my own people to see you do not make sixpence out of that which owes its very existence to you." Damn him,' added Mr Black, heartily ; 'the next time I go praying and begging for a great man's name, I'll get what I have got this time—insolence instead of thanks—the door instead of money.'

There was no sham about Mr Black's manner while he delivered himself of this sentence.

Clearly, Allan Stewart had rubbed his hair up the wrong way, and hurt the promoter grievously in the process. Arthur sat silent for a moment, surprised—wondering what he had best say next, and, while he meditated, Mr Black opened his mouth again :

'And, on the top of all this, you come,' he proceeded ; 'you come dissatisfied with what I have done for you—indignant that I have failed to do more. You are angry because I could not force the Company to buy that cursed place of yours in Lincoln's Inn, which I wish to Heaven had never been for sale, just as though Stewart did not serve me the same trick about that shop in the Poultry. I bought it on spec, pulled the old buildings down, ran up a splendid new shop as far as the first floor, and then offered it to the board. Do you think they would have it? "Pooh,

pooh!" says Mr Stewart; "what do we want with establishments in the Poultry? Less expensive situations will do for us;" and the confounded thing was thrown upon my hands. Had it not been for the "London and Home Counties Bank," which had on its board a man I knew, I should have been swamped—I tell you fairly that I should, Dudley. As it was, I sold my interest to the Company at a switching profit, which enabled me to give my friend ten per cent. on the purchase-money, and that pulled me through; and there the bank is now as prosperous a concern as any in London. Shares up to eight premium.'

It might be all true. With a terrible shock it occurred to Squire Dudley that there were other people besides himself in the world—other people looking for their halves, and percentages, and paid-up shares also.

In a moment he seemed to understand that he had taken a hand at a game of chances, in which no one, not even those best experienced in the cards, could ensure success. It was a lottery in which he had embarked; and, although he might blame those who had led him up to the wheel, still he felt he could not complain when the man who had been most sanguine of success drew a blank also. He was a gentleman. Even in his blackest hour of need, Arthur, with all his faults, weaknesses, and sins, never was untrue to his training and his ancestry. He had been born—weak fool though he was—a gentleman, bred one, remained one, and he could not bandy words with this clever, plausible swindler, who, seeing his companion's hesitation, continued:

'I have not much time to spare this afternoon, for I have letters to write, and lots of people to see; but as I perceive you are dissatisfied, Dudley, I'll tell you what I'll do: transfer to you a couple of hundred of my shares in the "Protector," paid up. That's two thousand pounds, at the worst; and if I see I can do anything more for you, I will. Don't be in too great a hurry, old fellow. That is the worst of all you country people—you think a fortune is to be made just in a minute. I'll stand by you, if you stand by me. I swear it to you, Dudley; there's my hand upon it. Now, do not—do not, I entreat of you, go and make yourself and that dear wife of yours uncomfortable. If you have to raise

a few thousands on Berrie Down, what matter? Did Berrie Down ever do anything for you that you should do anything for it? Stick to the Protector and Allan Stewart—that's my advice; and when you are in any difficulty come to me—that is my advice also. Now, good-bye—ta-ta—God bless you, Dudley!'

And thus exit Squire Dudley without speaking a word he had intended, but with a very strong impression on his mind that Mr Black, having been making free with the contents of a certain bottle, labelled 'Martell,' ordinarily concealed in the recesses of one of Tann's 'Reliance' safes, must, therefore, have spoken the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

As though people did not tell worse fibs when they are drunk than when they are sober, more especially in London—as though '*In vino veritas*' were not an exploded creed with the rising generation, many of whom do not speak truth either in their cups or out of them.

CHAPTER XXVI.

GREAT SUCCESSES.

WHILE the events I have related were influencing, more or less, the Dudley family history, the 'Protector Flour and Bread Company' was succeeding to an extent which it is given to few companies in our time to equal.

If a person be sufficiently interested in the prices of miscellaneous companies' shares, to run his eye down a list of, say, a hundred and fifty of the new Limited Liabilities, he will be surprised to find how few out of the number are quoted as being at par, to say nothing of at a premium. Dis., dis., dis., is the encouraging legend attached to one after another; but it was not thus with the Protector—steadily its shares went up. It grew to be considered a good investment. The ten pound shares (two pounds paid) were eagerly sought after; and, had an intending investor gone, about that period, to any broker, and expressed his

desire of purchasing into the Protector Bread Company, he would have been advised he was acting wisely—that the shares were very good property indeed.

And so every one believed. In all directions the Company's vans were to be encountered conveying bread to the far-away depôts, or else returning empty from the extremest ends of London. The bread was good; the directors—greatly to the disgust of their housekeepers and cooks, who were thus cheated out of a legitimate perquisite in the shape of commission—ate of the staff of life kneaded at their own bakeries, and were satisfied.

If an inferior batch was produced, woe to the master baker, on whom, straight away, General Sinclair poured his vials of wrath. If the flour were sour, as servants frequently declared it to be, Mr Bailey Crossenham's ears tingled for a week.

Never was a company better managed; never a staff more rigidly superintended.

Did Linnor, at the most easterly point of London, running short of bread, borrow a few loaves from his neighbour, Mr Bickley, and supply them as the genuine product of the Protector, Limited, down came a note from the Secretary's office, informing Mr Linnor, by 'order of the board,' that if such dereliction from the paths of duty occurred again, he, Mr Linnor, would forthwith be dismissed from the responsible position which he held.

Neither for those brilliant creatures, dressed in orange and green, who conveyed the bread from Stangate to all parts of the metropolis, was there such a thing as liberty. Their carts were numbered, and if, on the hottest day in summer, they stopped at the 'Spotted Stag,' in Mile End Road, or the 'White Hart,' in Newington, or the 'Greyhound,' in Fulham, or any other favourite house of call, for a pot of beer, 16, or 48, or 33, or 27, was had up the same evening before the yard superintendent, and 'cautioned' for all the world—so the men themselves said—as if the 'governor was a beak.'

If, after this caution, any one still preferred ale to employment, he was paid his wages and discharged on the spot.

Altogether, it was a very perfectly-managed Company, and quite a credit to its directors.

Great people, when the periodical philanthropic fit attacked their ranks, were not above driving over to Stangate, and inspecting the works ; and, on the occasion of such visits, the *Times* would come out with a leader, concerning pure bread and the adulteration of food, which always sent the shares up on the Stock Exchange, and made the aristocracy feel that they had conferred vast benefits on the labouring classes.

It was nice to be associated with so excellent a Company. Good people felt that the blessing of the Almighty must rest upon an enterprise, undertaken in so Christian a spirit (there was much mention of the poor in the prospectus), and that He, who had fed the Israelites with manna in the wilderness, would likewise satisfactorily regulate the Protector's dividends ; for which reason, and others too numerous and varied to mention, both great people and good people, and good and great combined in the same people, bought shares in the Company, sincerely believing that, since time began, there had never been any creature born so deserving of universal support and encouragement as Mr Black's baby, which was now a great child able to run alone, and earn something for itself, and even repay its benefactors a portion of the money advanced to start it fairly in the world.

When the first half-yearly meeting was held, the directors not merely announced a dividend at the rate of fifteen per cent. per annum, but also stated their conviction, that the close of another half-year would exhibit a much larger proportion of profit, since the expenses of conducting such a business in the first instance were necessarily greater than would subsequently prove the case.

Moreover, it was resolved that no further call should be made on the shareholders, except in the event of larger mills and more extensive premises being required, when, as a natural consequence, higher dividends might confidently be expected.

The directors had pleasure in communicating the existence of a large reserve fund ; and in stating that the mills at Stangate had been greatly increased in size, that the machinery was the very best known for the purposes required, that every modern improvement in the grinding of wheat and manufacture of flour was to be

found on the premises, and that, as regarded the bakehouse, it was decidedly the most spacious, convenient, and best ventilated in the kingdom.

All this, and a vast amount more, being duly reported in the daily and weekly papers, shares (money at the time chancing to be cheap) went up again.

Then, the magazine-writers got hold of the Protector as a nucleus on which might be constructed a few light and entertaining papers concerning bread-making from the beginning of time, tracing the progress of the staff of life from the kneading-troughs of the Israelites down to the works of the new Company at Stangate.

There was no difficulty about inspecting the Protector's premises. A man, salaried on purpose, received ordinary visitors at the gates, and escorted them through the whole process from grinding to kneading, that is, if they came at an hour when kneading was in progress—as literary gentlemen always did.

'Wheat, from the Ear to the Breakfast Table,' was the exhaustive title of one paper. Another, supposed to be written by the same author, appeared as 'Hot Rolls !' 'Our Daily Bread' graced the columns of one of the religious periodicals ; while, 'Adulteration Considered Morally and Socially,' was universally attributed by the critics to the pen of one of the most gifted and thoughtful authoresses of the day.

With all these helps, was it any wonder that the shares of the Protector should soon be at a premium ? that every one connected with the Company felt himself to be to some extent a person of consequence ; that Arthur Dudley forgot his fears, and only remembered his interest in the great concern ; that even the mortgaging of Berrie Down grew in time to be a mere bagatelle—a trifle not worth fretting about ?

What might the shares not ultimately touch ! Supposing the ten pound share, paid up, came in time to be worth a hundred pounds, why, his income would be enormous ; and there was nothing to prevent the shares going on rising, rising in value. If they reached fifty, would he sell ? Arthur could not decide this point to his own satisfaction. If he sold, he should then have

no anxiety about loss ; but, on the other hand, would it be wise to sell before they reached their maximum ? Then, who ever could tell when the maximum was reached ?

These were the questions which perplexed the Squire, building his castles in the air, while pacing on the calm summer evenings round and round Lincoln's Inn Fields, smoking the while such cigars as never fall to the lot of any one save secretaries and others of the same ilk, who get all sorts of good things given to them by all kinds of singular people.

Arthur, in the days of which I am now writing, never bought a cigar by any chance. He had boxes of the best Havannas sent him, which he was now not too proud to accept.

The world had gone round since he strolled a poor man through the fields at Berrie Down. Accepting a favour did not, according to the new code, mean placing himself under an obligation. No ; it rather meant conferring an obligation on the donor.

What those donors expected Arthur Dudley would be able to do for them it is impossible even to conjecture. Arthur himself never knew ; and so, with an untroubled conscience, he smoked his cigars and dreamed his dreams.

At this time, Heather was away from home—away at the seaside with her children, whom she took down to Hastings, for a month, in the hope that sea-air might do Lally more good than all Dr Chickton's prescriptions.

Quite as tenderly as he had treated Master Charles Hope, that renowned practitioner inquired into Lally's symptoms, and devoted himself to the restoration of her health ; but for all this care the child proved ungrateful.

She did not get much better. All the tonics Doctor Chickton could prescribe, and Heather with difficulty persuade her to take, failed to restore her health, to make the little feet patter, patter over the floor as of old.

She could walk a short distance, certainly, without much fatigue, and drive for an hour or so at a time, but still she was not the Lally of a twelvemonth previously.

'What's the use of cramming the child with all that physic ?' Doctor Marsden inquired one day when he called in Lincoln's

Inn Fields. 'Chickton ordered it, did he? of course he did. When you go and pay a man a guinea, he must order you something; but now, without a guinea at all, I will give you my advice, which is none the worse for being gratuitous. Take her to the seaside; let her be out all day long; if she will bear bathing, bathe her; if that don't set her up, nothing will.'

Very heartily Heather wished she could have told Doctor Marsden, that, considering his son was the cause of Lally's illness, she thought the least he could do was to proffer his advice civilly; but advice in any shape was not to be despised, and accordingly she adopted his suggestion, and bore Lally off.

At Hastings, she met not merely Mr and Mrs Compton Raidsford and family, but also Mr Allan Stewart; who, after a time, took rather kindly to Lally, and became interested in her recovery.

Like all the rest of the world, he too had his favourite medical man, whom he not merely counselled Heather to consult, but to whom also he wrote a letter of introduction, in which he described her as his friend, Mrs Dudley.

They had been the merest acquaintances in town; but intimacy is of quick growth when people meet every day, and fifty times a day, on the sands, on the Parade, in the lodgings of mutual friends, standing listening to the bands, and to the solitary murmur of the sea as it flows in on the shore.

From Mrs Raidsford Heather heard how admirably Agnes was managing Berrie Down.

'What a wonderful creature she must be!' continued the lady; and yet Heather fancied there was a tone of disparagement in Mrs Raidsford's remark, for which she was at a loss to account, until informed that 'Miss Baldwin was never out of the house;' 'has taken to your sisters quite as if they were her own.'

This was not exactly news to Heather, for she had understood from Agnes that Miss Baldwin continued very kind indeed; but why the fact should irritate Mrs Raidsford puzzled her, until one of the Misses Raidsford, observing, 'Yes, we are entirely forgotten now—Miss Baldwin is fond of new faces,' threw some light upon the subject.

That Miss Baldwin should ever have been fond of the Misses Raidsford's faces surprised Heather not a little ; but still she knew that Kemms Park had at one time patronized Moorlands, and was able to comprehend now where the sting of the Berrie Down acquaintanceship lay.

With all her heart she wished Miss Baldwin would leave the girls alone. Beyond all things she dreaded their being exposed to jealous and envious remarks. The blessed seclusion, the utter privacy in which they had hitherto lived, must, she knew, have quite unfitted them to bear unkind speeches or ill-natured inuendoes with equanimity.

Had she acted rightly in leaving them alone at Berrie Down—alone to receive many visitors, and to bear the brunt of such gossip as that in which she perceived Mrs Raidsford was not above indulging ? The new acquaintances, whom Heather in her innocence had imagined would make the country a pleasanter residence for the girls, might only expose their conduct to misconstruction. She had no fear of anything Agnes and Laura might say or do, but she felt afraid of what might be said of them. Lord Kemms, she knew, was now at the Park, having at length returned from Austria ; and in one of her letters Agnes mentioned his having called at Berrie Down with his aunt.

Could this be another thorn in Mrs Raidsford's side ? Small as was the amount of tittle-tattle which reached Heather's ears, still she had heard some talk of an attachment between Lord Kemms and one of the young ladies at Moorlands. And, although it never entered into her mind to imagine her husband's portionless sisters could prove rivals to the great contractor's daughters, she yet gradually came to understand that Mrs Raidsford was of a different opinion, and felt Berrie Down to be a stumbling-block in her path.

'There is some distinction come between Mr R. and his Lordship,' Mrs Raidsford was kind enough to explain to Mrs Dudley ; 'we are not on the same terms of equality with him that we used to be. I must say, I think the coolness began on our side, for Mr R., as you, no doubt, have heard, has a perfect maniac against companies of all kinds, just as though people had not a right to make them-

selves into companies if they like, and it seems his Lordship told him he would have nothing to do with that "Protective" affair of yours—no offence, Mrs Dudley—after which he went away and becomes one of the fundamental proprietors of it. So, when his Lordship came home, Mr R. put on his high and mighty, and would not call at the Park—as if the "Protective" was any business of his—and so, when we meet, we only bow; and I am as satisfied as I can be of anything that his Lordship knows no more than the babe unborn what the reason of our distance is. Indeed, he was beginning to ask me at the station, when we met him, only the train moved off before he could complete his inquiry. I think I shall write to his Lordship, and detail the matter. If Mr R. likes to disseparate himself from old friends, that is no reason why we should—is it, Mrs Dudley?'

In answer to which appeal, Heather said she did not know. She thought, however, she should not like to be on friendly terms with any one to whose acquaintance her husband objected.

'But, then, you are like nobody else,' retorted Mrs Raidsford.

This remark, intended to be both hurtful and depreciating, failed of its effect, because Heather mentally hoped she was not much like Mrs Raidsford. 'A woman whom Raidsford ought to have been pilloried for marrying,' observed Mr Stewart; 'apparently, he is a very worthy fellow himself, but I am quite satisfied there must be some terrible want in the character of any person who could make such a creature his wife. There ought to be a law against those kind of marriages.'

'Perhaps—,' began Heather, and then she stopped, colouring a little.

'Pray, complete your sentence, Mrs Dudley,' said Mr Stewart; 'you have roused my curiosity, and it is not fair to have it unsatisfied.'

'I only hesitated lest what rose to my mind might sound ill-natured. I do not mean, however, any sneer when I say, that perhaps Mrs Raidsford may have been very suitable to her husband when he married her. It is so difficult to express an opinion like that without appearing to reflect on a man's origin,' she added, getting into unutterable depths of confusion; 'but I often think

about a speech 'a very dear girl I once knew made concerning Mrs Raidsford. She said, "it was such a pity a man could not choose again when he came to years of social discretion."'

'She used to say also,' remarked Lucy Dudley, 'that if Mr Raidsford could only have foreseen how high he was to rise in the world, Mrs Raidsford would probably now have been wife to some mechanic—cooking steaks for his one o'clock dinner, instead of being mistress of Moorlands, and having servants much more lady-like than herself under her. Bessie never was weary of mimicking Mrs Raidsford.'

'Who was this clever young lady?' asked Mr Stewart, for whom the very bitterness of such a speech had its peculiar charm.

'A cousin of ours,' Lucy answered.

'Married, or still eligible?' inquired the old bachelor.

Lucy did not reply; she looked at Heather, who, after a moment's embarrassed pause, replied,—

'She was engaged to be married, when with us, last winter; but we have not heard from her since she left Berrie Down.'

'Some feminine quarrel,' thought Mr Stewart; and, looking out over the sea, he laughed softly to himself at the idea that all women were alike,—that no two women could agree; that, let them be young or old, pretty or ugly, sweet or sour, they could still jangle and dispute like the veriest viragoes.

And yet, this Mrs Dudley puzzled him: if she had a temper, she must, he thought, have it under wonderful control; if there were any evil in her, she must have an astonishing power of concealing its existence. To sisters and children, to friends and servants, she was alike, gentle and forbearing. Never but once did Mr Stewart see her eyes darken, and her face flush under the influence of any strong emotion; and then it was a slight thing which caused the tell-tale blood to rush to brow, and cheek, and neck.

'I expect my niece, Mrs Croft, to-morrow,' he said; 'I am happy to think she will be able to make your acquaintance.'

Then there came that look, which was not quite pleasant, over Heather's face,—that look which set Mr Stewart marvelling as to 'what could be up' between the two women? Not an early jeal-

ousy, he decided ; for Mrs Croft was many a year older than Mrs Dudley. What could it be? He was an especially inquisitive old gentleman, as sharp and keen concerning matters of feeling as he was about matters of business, and so he went on,—

‘ You have never met her, I think ? ’

‘ Never,’ Heather answered ; but my husband knew Mrs Croft very well indeed at one time, and quite recently they renewed their former acquaintance at Copt Hall.’

‘ Copt Hall—is not that Mr Hope’s place? I recollect now, Douglas and his wife were staying there last autumn. Your husband is some relation of the Essex Hopes, is he not?’

‘ His mother was a Miss Hope,’ Heather explained ; and shortly afterwards Mr Stewart took his leave, trying to remember something he had heard about Miss Laxton having jilted a former suitor when she married his nephew. ‘ Was Dudley the lucky fellow’s name?’ he asked himself. ‘ I’ll find out all about it when madam comes.’

In due time madam came, and her husband with her ; and from the hour of their arrival Heather commenced longing to return to town. Had it not been, indeed, that Lally was decidedly gaining strength, she would forthwith have packed up and departed ; but the child was better ; she could run about a little, and at times there was a colour in her face which made the poor mother trust the health and the gaiety of old was about to be restored to her.

How Mrs Croft ridiculed Heather’s anxiety about the little girl ; how scornfully she would listen to Lally’s prattle ; with what open contempt she watched the child sometimes struggling into Mr Stewart’s arms, and beheld him fondling and caressing her, were things to be seen, not described.

A stately woman, who looked born to rule a nation of slaves, and seemed to regard every one with whom she came in contact, her husband included, as so much dirt under feet ; a woman who would have been beautiful but for the expression of habitual bad temper on her face ; a woman who made every creature she met uncomfortable ; who treated Heather with supercilious insolence, and at length told her without the slightest reserve she had in-

structed her child well. 'She is playing her cards quite as cleverly as you,' finished Mrs Croft, in a tone of suppressed fury, one day when she saw Lally throw down her wooden spade, and run with outstretched arms to meet Mr Stewart. 'Commend me to a meek, quiet woman when underhand means are to be employed, and a legacy is in question.'

'Do you imagine I am expecting a legacy from any one?' asked Heather.

'Of course I do,' was the reply, spoken while Mrs Croft swept along the Marina with her dress trailing about two yards on the ground behind her; 'of course I do,' and her dark eyes looked over Heather scornfully; 'people generally expect their godfathers to leave them something, do they not? and your godfather's money is well worth finessing for. I commend your prudence; some persons might not think such conduct quite honourable, but that never seems to have occurred to you. Mr Stewart has hitherto treated Mr Croft as his heir. Now, however—'

'Mr Stewart's affairs have not the slightest interest for me,' interrupted Heather, hastily. 'Good morning!' and, without giving her companion time to utter another word, Mrs Dudley turned and walked back along the Parade to the point where Lally was still engaged in animated conversation with her two gentlemen friends.

'It is time for you to come in, my pet,' she said, descending one of the flights of wooden steps, and making her way with difficulty over the shingle to the sands. 'If you see my sister, Mr Stewart, would you kindly ask her to bring Leonard back? I do not like him to be out in the heat of the day. I do not think it is good for children to be on the shore when the sun has so much power.'

'Now, they have had a quarrel,' decided Mr Stewart, glancing along the Parade, where he descried Mrs Aymescourt Croft wending her way homewards, solitary and stately, haughty and defiant. 'I should like immensely to know what it is all about. There is something very decidedly amiss between my amiable niece and Mrs Dudley.'

'Your wife and our pretty friend do not seem able to stable their

horses comfortably together,' he said to Mr Croft, when Heather, who declined all offers both of companionship and of assistance, had borne Lally—bitterly protesting against such injustice—away. 'How is it, do you think?'

'My wife is jealous,' was the prompt reply.

'Does she fancy you are smitten?'

'No; but she thinks you are,' Mr Croft answered. 'She considers that Mrs Dudley stands too good a chance of being favourably remembered in your will, for much cordial feeling to exist amongst us.'

'And why the devil should I leave Mrs Dudley sixpence?' asked Mr Stewart. 'What is she to me that I should bequeath anything to her, more than to the first stranger I meet on the Marina?'

'My charming wife,' replied Mr Croft, in that daring tone of off-hand recklessness which, as Mr Black had remarked, was one of his peculiarities, 'my charming wife, giving you credit for a vein of romance, and a depth of sensibility which, I confess, I never noticed in your character, imagines that the revival of old associations, the thoughts of "Auld Lang Syne," in fact, which the sight of Mrs Dudley must naturally have awakened, may produce an undesirable effect upon the ultimate disposal of your property. For my part, I am delighted at the opportunity now afforded of assuring you I would much rather you left your money to Mrs Dudley than to my wife.'

'What are you talking about, Douglas?' asked his uncle. From the drawing-room window of the house they occupied Mrs Croft could, with the aid of an opera-glass, see, not merely that Mr Stewart stopped as he put this question, but that he looked excited and perplexed. 'What is Mrs Dudley to me, I ask again, that I should leave her sixpence? She is a sweet woman, and pretty, and devoted to her blockhead of a husband, but I should not care if I never saw her again. Does your wife think I am in love with her? Does she imagine I am so nearly doting as all that comes to?'

Douglas Croft looked steadily in his uncle's face for a moment, and then burst out laughing.

‘It really is too amusing,’ he said. ‘Do you mean to tell me you do not know who Mrs Dudley was?’

‘No; who the deuce *was* Mrs Dudley?’ inquired the other, testily.

‘And she never has enlightened you?’ persisted Mr Croft.

‘If she had enlightened me I should have known, I suppose, and I do not know who or what she was, excepting a simpleton to marry Dudley. As you seem so well informed, tell me this wonderful secret. Who was Mrs Dudley?’

‘Heather Bell,’ answered Mr Croft.

‘You do not mean that?’

‘I do, upon my honour. Miss Hope told me and my wife, and explained that it was you who selected the name which seems to suit her so admirably.’

Mr Stewart did not take any direct notice of this information; he only resumed his walk over the sands, saying to himself,—

‘And so that is Heather Bell—so that is Heather Bell!’

‘You understand now why my wife regards her with but small favour,’ continued Mr Croft; ‘indeed, there is another reason why, perhaps, mutually the two ladies dislike and distrust each other. Years ago, Dudley and Miss Laxton were engaged. I knew nothing of it when I met her—when I proposed to her—when she accepted me; but the engagement was a fact, nevertheless. I am so devotedly attached to her now, that there can be no indiscretion in merely alluding to her one fault—a love of money. I am confident that she liked Dudley better than she ever liked me; but I, being the richer of the two, gained the prize. Of course, it is not in a woman’s nature, at least it is not in Arabella’s nature, to look kindly on the wife whom the man she jilted afterwards married. On the other hand, all the world knows Dudley does not appreciate quite so highly the blessing he has gained as the blessing he has lost; and for that reason I fancy poor Mrs Dudley does not feel particularly comfortable in my Arabella’s society. Further, there may be a little mutual jealousy, both being above the average in appearance. Now, you have the exact state of the case, so far as I know it.’

Still Mr Stewart made no reply; he only walked on more swiftly

over the sands, which were at this point wet and disagreeable, while the waves came lapping in—lapping in ; and the burden of his reverie was, ‘So that is Heather Bell—that is Heather Bell!’

There was a story in the man’s life, though no one of his kith or kin suspected it. He had loved once—once in his middle age, when the disease always leaves traces behind—passionately! and the woman he loved was Heather’s mother ; but the secret of his unrequited attachment had lain between the two ; and now she was dead, and here was her child, and the child of the man who took the best hope of his life away, thrown across his path once more.

Heather Bell—Heather Bell, the waves seemed to murmur the name as they stole upon the sands ; and the old man grew young again as the years faded away ; and he saw, reflected as in a mirror, the bright glad face of the long and long ago, when he first, at Sir Wingrave Bell’s, met Lilian Gladwin, who was even in those days engaged to the baronet’s cousin, William, then a poor curate in London, and afterwards the poor rector of Layford, Derbyshire.

CHAPTER XXVII.

‘LIKE A MAN’S HAND.’

WHAT a cruel world it is ; what a hard, wicked, misjudging, uncharitable, mercenary world ! Thus Heather Dudley reflected, while, without waiting for Lucy or Leonard, she walked homewards with Lally, the hot tears filling her eyes and coursing down her cheeks as she recalled Mrs Croft’s insulting words, as she came gradually to comprehend the full meaning of her insolent accusation.

She could not help crying ; the world’s cruelty and the world’s wickedness were new experiences to her.

The maladies of being thought ill of, of having her most innocent notions misconstrued, of hearing intentions imputed to her which she was utterly incapable of harbouring, had not fallen to her when

young, and now taken in her maturer years they seemed so severe that it was almost impossible for her to endure them patiently.

To be accused of toadying any person ; that it should for a moment be supposed she could ever have mentioned the name of her family to Mr Stewart, when, lest it might even seem as though she were thereby preferring any claim to old acquaintanceship on him, she had sedulously avoided all allusions to her former home, or any of her early recollections.

‘I—I—do such a thing!’ she thought ; ‘I pay court to him for his money ; I, who detest money ; I, who could live on the merest pittance anywhere and be happy ; and who would rather live on a pittance than mix amongst hard, cruel, mercenary people ; and to imply that I was such a wretch as to school my innocent child in deceit and affectation. Ah!’ she reflected, softening a little ; ‘it is plain she never was a mother ; if she had been, she could not have imputed trickery of that kind to me ;’ which speech showed, not how much Heather knew of mothers, but how little she knew of the world. ‘It was cruel, though—’ thus the mental strain ran on—‘cruel to imagine such a thing ; cruel to express it ;’ and Heather would probably have continued making these statements silently to her own heart, whilst her tears flowed as fast as her thoughts, had Lally not caused a diversion by stating :

‘You walk too quick, ma ; you tire me.’ Then Heather sat down upon one of the benches and caught Lally to her ; she was ashamed that even for a moment her own anger should have made her forget the child’s possible weariness. She had gone on, dragging Lally after her, and the little one was both warm and tired with the unwonted exercise.

‘Are you hot, too, ma?’ she asked, trying to push up her mother’s veil, an attempt which Heather strove too late to resist. ‘Oh!’ you’ve been crying, ma ; you’ve been vexed ; was it tall wicked lady ? Never mind—Lally’s better—arn’t you glad Lally’s nearly better as well ? Do not cry, pease, mamma — pease — pease.’

And the poor little eager face puckered itself up to weep also ; and the brown eyes—which had in them at times a look of Heather—filled with tears, and the thin arms twined themselves

about her mother's neck, and Lally became altogether very piteous on the subject of her mother's grief.

Looking out over the dancing sea, so bright, so sunshiny, so smooth, clasping her first-born to her heart, Heather felt that there was reason in the child's words ; that, seeing Lally's health even partially restored, she had no right to weep or lament over a mere worldly grievance.

What was Mrs Croft to her, that she should attach weight to her angry sentences, her slanderous accusations ? What were they all—Mr Stewart, and his nephew and niece ? Nothing but people whom she had met for a day or two, and should perhaps meet again never more. Why should she fret over a false and libellous charge ? If she were capable of such conduct as that whereof Mrs Croft had accused her, she might then weep, but not otherwise.

She would endeavour for the future to avoid St Leonard's. Her children should keep down by the East Parade, or amuse themselves on the Castle Hill, for the few days she purposed remaining at Hastings. No one should say she put herself or them in the way of rich people—at least, no one should say so with even a shadow of a foundation of truthfulness.

She would not do what she had in the first smart of the blow intended—pack up, and leave Hastings by the next train—but she would never subject herself to such an imputation again. She could, and she would, be out for the future when Mr Stewart called, and she might walk at such hours and in such directions as should separate her and hers altogether from their more wealthy acquaintances.

It is quite unnecessary to add that she and Lucy had a thoroughly comfortable and exhaustive conversation on the subject that same evening after the children were in bed ; in the course of which Lucy expressed her opinion, not merely that dear Heather was quite right in her decision about Mr Stewart, but also concerning the girls at Berrie Down.

' We should all be ever so much happier together in town,' the young lady opined ; ' together anywhere. Could not Arthur let Berrie Down, or put in a care-taker, as Mr Black has so often suggested ? not but that it would seem terrible to leave the Hollow

altogether ; still, if we are not to live there, what is the use of having it lying empty ?' In reply to which Heather could only answer : ' There is no place in the world like Berrie Down.' And then the pair had a little sympathetic cry, which did them both a considerable amount of good.

After all, they had spent a very pleasant month at Hastings ; and though a cloud had towards the last darkened their sky, still who can expect fair weather to continue day after day ?

Is not it the inevitable rule that storms must come, if only to clear the air ; that women should shed tears in order that their eyes may be all the brighter afterwards ? What right had Mrs Dudley to look for a succession of sunshiny hours, when Douglas Croft, who was popularly supposed to be the most lucky fellow on earth, met with nothing but contrary winds and heavy rains during the short periods in the year he and his wife reluctantly spent together ?

If there were any state of life in which Mrs Douglas Croft would have been content, that state had still to be discovered ; if there were anything her husband could have done to please her, he had certainly never hit upon it.

Did he keep the windows shut, she wondered what he was made of to sit in such a suffocating room ; did he fling them wide open in the morning, he knew she detested a draught, and the sight of that glitter on the sea ; did he wish to ride, she thought he might have more consideration than to propose his wife mounting a hired horse ; did he suggest driving, she wondered, if he were so fond of seeing the country, he had not brought down his servants and carriages, as other people did ; did he offer to walk with her, she was invariably tired ; did he even mention leaving the house without her, she thought, ' considering he favoured her with so little of his society, he might remain in-doors for half an hour in the course of the day ; ' did he go out in a boat, she might as well have married a London tradesman ; did he finally ask her what the devil she would have him do, since he had come to the slowest place on earth to please her and not himself, she replied, that if he had not sufficiently gentlemanly, or even manly, feeling

to know how to treat his wife properly, it was a pity he ever married any one higher in rank than some poor factory girl.

'I could not have married you, remember,' answered Mr Croft, 'had you not first jilted Dudley;' whereupon she sighed, 'Poor Arthur!' and declared '*he* never would have broken a woman's heart.'

'You would very soon have broken his,' retorted her husband; 'though, upon my honour, Dudley is the only man I should not have pitied seeing married to you.'

'Because you admire that creature with red hair, whom he chose after me! after me by way of contrast, I suppose. Oh! she has not red hair? I confess I was under the delusion she had; but no doubt your opportunities of judging have been greater than mine. She is a very pretty woman, you say; of course you think every woman pretty, excepting your own wife. She is the kind of creature some men do admire, and she has that manner—that meek, mild, submissive, milk-and-water manner—which always makes me long to strike her and ask how she likes *that*. I do detest those amiable hypocrites. It is a pity you cannot get rid of me, and marry her.'

'If I were to marry all the women I admire, I should have as many wives as Brigham Young,' answered Mr Croft: 'besides, I am not quite certain that Mrs Dudley is my style. She has too much of the angel about her; certainly, "extremes meet"; but still, after you, that change would be almost too severe:' and so the pair were wont to wrangle on, while Mr Stewart sat calmly reading the *Times*, or else remarked that he never so much regretted his single condition as when he witnessed his nephew's connubial felicity.

'It is all his fault,' Mrs Croft was in the habit of asserting, to which Mr Stewart invariably made reply:

'I know that, my dear Arabella, perfectly well; no wife ever is in fault.'

'Mrs Dudley could not be, we may suppose,' Mrs Croft snapped back, on the day following her quarrel with Heather.

'If she could, she must differ greatly from the remainder of her

sex,' answered Mr Stewart, who was, Mrs Croft frequently assured those lady friends that she honoured with her confidence, 'one of the most disagreeable, cynical old bores a woman ever had to tolerate for the sake of his money.'

On the whole, visits from his niece were amongst the number of those blessings with which Mr Stewart could very readily have dispensed. He liked his nephew, and he pitied him; but Mrs Croft was decidedly *de trop* in any house which held at the same time Allan Stewart, Esquire, of Layford.

Very frequently, people wondered why uncle and nephew kept up separate establishments, but then it was remembered that more than once Mr Stewart had openly regretted the fact of his only near relation having married a woman whom he never could regard in the light of a daughter.

Of this fact Mrs Croft was perfectly well aware, and she felt madly jealous accordingly, when she beheld the increasing intimacy between Heather and her godfather.

'She will supplant you to a certainty, Douglas,' the amiable wife remarked.

'Well, my love, if she do, I dare say we can still, with economy, manage to exist,' answered Mr Croft. 'Upon strict principles of justice, indeed, I think Dudley ought to have my uncle's money; I won you from him, you remember; now, it seems to me, he ought to have a turn. Do not fret yourself about the matter, Arabella—I take it philosophically—why cannot you do the same?'

'The same! I have no patience with such absurdity; but I think I have showed Mrs Dudley there is one of the family, at least, clever enough to see what she is trying for.'

'Do you not think it possible for a woman to be too clever, occasionally?' inquired her husband; 'because it occurs to my mind you have overshot the mark by the merest trifle. My uncle did not know the touching relation in which he stood to Mrs Dudley until you quarrelled with her. Very possibly he would never have known, had I not, in consequence of that little flourish up the Marina, told him.'

'You—told him?'

'Yes, my love; I considered it was only right he should know

the great provocation you had received, so that he might not think the slight coolness between you and Mrs Dudley originated in any fault on your side. He quite understands your feelings, and appreciates them fully.’

‘Douglas, you are either mad or infatuated.’

‘Do not moot the former idea before my uncle, or he may cut me off with a shilling, and so deprive you of all chance of ever managing his estates. For myself, I do not care for more money ; I am thinking of going out to Australia, and taking a sheep-farm ; of doing the Arcadian for a few years, during which time you will marry some one else, and I shall enjoy a bachelor’s existence by way of variety. I am growing horribly tired of the monotony of civilized life. I wonder if I could join a mission as a muscular Christian, and go out to convert the heathen. I should like to see how a fellow with a lot of wives manages them. I should preach the same doctrines as—’

But at this point Mrs Croft swept out of the room, and her husband took advantage of her absence to seize his hat and leave the house, and march away in a blazing sun to Hastings, where, according to the programme she had sketched for her own guidance, Heather was not at home.

‘I am getting confoundedly tired of this,’ Mr Croft remarked to his uncle next day, as they lounged together along the Marina ; ‘suppose we swear business requires our immediate presence in town ; cannot we have letters by the five o’clock post, compelling us to go up by the express to-morrow morning ? Madam in town is bad enough, but madam at a watering-place, or in the country, is scarcely to be borne.’

‘What a choice you made, Douglas !’ said his uncle, in a tone of plaintive rebuke.

‘Did I choose at all ? I doubt it,’ was the reply. ‘Since my marriage, I often should have liked to choose ; but, perhaps, had power been given me to do so, I might only have made a worse mess of it. The best of a marriage like mine is, it makes a man so philosophical. It leaves one nothing to wish for, nothing to desire ; jealousy, over-affection, anxiety about the dear creature’s health ; sleepless nights if her finger aches ; torturing doubt if

another fellow is over-zealous in finding her shawls—from all these troubles I am exempt. My domestic life leaves me nothing to fret about. Like that young man in Longfellow's poem,—

‘“Light-hearted and content,
I wander through the world;”

only I do not carry two locks of hair about with me and sentimentalize concerning them, so that in one respect I have an advantage over the widower.’

‘If your wife were in heaven, I do not think you would carry one of her curls done up in note-paper in your left-hand waistcoat pocket, after the fashion of a man I once knew,’ remarked Mr Stewart a little grimly.

‘Well, now, do you know I think I should,’ answered Mr Croft; ‘when a woman is so kind as to die, it seems to me the least in common gratitude her husband can do, is to use his handkerchief freely, and publicly preserve little mementoes of her—the stalk of the last bunch of grapes she ate, for instance, her box of rouge, or the puff wherewith she powdered her face. To me there is something inexpressibly touching about relics; most probably because they are useless. I always notice people admire and reverence things which are utterly useless, that is one reason I am so fond of my wife. Oh! Arabella; oh, my beloved! there she stands at the window awaiting my return. Signalling for it, too, by all that’s wonderful; shall we go and ascertain the cause of that waving cambric?’ And Mr Stewart agreeing, the pair crossed the road and entered the house, when they soon discovered the reason of Mrs Croft’s anxiety for their return in the shape of a telegram for Mr Stewart, which had arrived about an hour previously.

‘It is from Dudley,’ said that gentleman, placing the paper in his nephew’s hand. ‘Nice kettle of fish, is not it? We can catch the next train, I suppose?’

‘What is the matter; what has happened?’ inquired Mrs Croft.

‘Nothing, except that a gentleman on our board will not be reasonable,’ answered Mr Stewart. ‘He wants talking to, I think. Come, Douglas—that is, if you are coming with me. Good-bye, Arabella, we shall be down again to-morrow.’

‘Good-bye, my dear,’ repeated Mr Croft. ‘Comfort yourself, as I do, that the parting is not for ever;’ and the pair hurried off to St Leonard’s Station, talking as they went about the telegram, which Mr Stewart now tore up into little scraps, and scattered to the wind.

‘My mind always misgave me concerning him,’ said Mr Stewart. ‘I asked Black specially if he had authority for putting his name on the direction.’

‘It is an old trick of Black’s, I believe, that of using names without permission,’ answered Mr Croft; ‘you will see Frank, I suppose, and try to alter his purpose?’

‘Yes, that is why I am now going to town; and I asked you to accompany me, thinking you would be glad of a holiday.’

‘You are very kind. I do not fancy I should have much cared for a *tête-à-tête* with madam by the sad sea waves; and Mrs Dudley refuses to be at home to me.’

‘You can scarcely blame her for that,’ remarked his uncle.

‘I am not blaming her, only I think it is carrying the theory of husband and wife being one a little too far. However, if such be her will, I must resign myself to it.’

They were standing on the platform at St Leonard’s as Mr Croft spoke thus, and even as he spoke, the train came out of the first tunnel and stopped to take up its passengers.

‘Why, good heavens, there is Mrs Dudley,’ exclaimed Mr Croft. ‘Can you make room for us?’ he asked, eagerly opening the door of the compartment she occupied. ‘Are you all returning to town? I had not the slightest expectation of meeting you here.’

‘We always meant to return to-day,’ answered Heather, after she had spoken to Mr Stewart, and the two gentlemen were seated *vis-à-vis*. ‘But I thought you were going to remain for some time longer?’

‘So we are, unhappily, I believe,’ he replied, putting up the window in order to keep the smoke out of the carriage while passing through the second tunnel. ‘I only wish,’ he added, as they sped on out into the sunshine again, ‘we were not going to remain. I think St Leonard’s the most wearisome spot on the face of the whole earth.’

‘And we have enjoyed our visit so much !’ said Heather.

‘But then ladies have resources within themselves of which we men know nothing,’ he answered.

‘I cannot agree with that,’ Heather replied ; ‘we may have resources at home, but certainly not in lodgings ; and there is one thing you can do which we cannot—smoke ; Lucy and I, for instance, could not have amused ourselves for a whole evening walking up and down the Parade slowly puffing cigars, as I have seen you and Mr Stewart doing.’

‘No, but you could let your dresses sweep the ground,’ answered Mr Croft. ‘I often fancy that swish-swish of my wife’s train must produce the same soothing effect upon her nerves as a cigar does on mine. Now, Miss Lally, you have not spoken one word to me for the last four days, and my heart is broken in consequence. Will you be good and talk to me now ?’ and Mr Croft put out his hand to the little girl, who came tumbling over from the opposite corner to make up friends again with her old admirer, who took her on his knee, and instituted particular inquiries into the state of her health.

‘Was she better—much better—able to run half a mile without getting tired ?’

‘Yes,’ she declared, ‘more than ’at ; ’ook at mine face ; ma says it has got fat ;’ and she put up her little hands to her cheeks, and so drew all the flesh forward for Mr Croft to contemplate.

‘Fat, are you, little one ?’ broke in Mr Stewart ; ‘not much of that, I fear ; let me look at you. She does seem considerably better,’ he added, addressing Mrs Dudley. ‘You will take her to see Mr Henry, though, will you not ?’

Heather answered that she certainly should, whereupon Lally insisted on knowing exactly who Mr Henry was, and being informed a doctor, declared she would rather not see him. ‘Other doctor gave me nasty stuff to drink, sour, and Lally did not like him.’

‘Very ungrateful on your part,’ remarked Lucy, ‘for Doctor Chickton was exceedingly kind to you.’

‘Didn’t like him,’ repeated the child, determinedly ; ‘said sour

stuff wasn't bad to take, and it was dre'ful ; said it would make Lally well, and it didn't. He told 'tories, he did.'

'Are you glad you are going back to London ?' inquired Mr Stewart.

'No,' said Lally, 'don't like it either. I'd like to go home and see the chick-a-biddies, and Dash, and Nip, and Nep, and the ponies, and Ned ;' and so the child talked on, her eyes dancing with delight as she spoke of the old home any other little girl might almost have forgotten in the time, while Mr Stewart looked thoughtfully in her face flushed with excitement, and wondered what value his friend, Mr Rymner Henry, might set on her chances of life.

Mr Croft delighted greatly in Lally. He encouraged her to be what her mamma called naughty, to chatter away at express speed, to tell him all about Berrie Down, and Aggy, and Laura, 'and then there used to be Bessie, you know,' added the child. 'Ah ! Bessie was good to Lally. She singed to her, and dressed the beau-ful-lest dolls ; but Lally will never see Bessie no more—no, never no more ;' and the little face began to twitch, and the lips to tremble, and then the brown eyes filled with tears, and finally Lally lifted up her voice and wept.

'What is the matter ?' inquired Mr Stewart, who had been engaged in a conversation with Lucy. 'What have you done, Douglas, to cause such grief ?'

'I want to see Bessie,' sobbed the child.

'And who is it that is so cruel as to prevent your seeing her ?' asked Mr Stewart.

'She is not with us now,' explained Mrs Dudley. 'She was staying at the Hollow for some months before we left Hertfordshire, and Lally grew very fond of her. I cannot imagine why she so continually talks about her now, though ; I do not fancy other children have such tenacious memories. Sometimes for weeks together she will never mention Bessie's name, and then she breaks out as you see. I wish she would not do it. It is very bad for her, fretting so much after any one. Lally, my darling, you must be patient ; whenever Bessie can come to see you, she will.'

‘No,’ moaned Lally, ‘no more. Bessie will come to Lally back again, never no more.’

There was something terribly pathetic about the child’s grief even to those who knew nothing whatever of Bessie, or of the circumstances connected with her departure.

‘Can’t she come and see the child?’ asked Mr Stewart, a little testily. ‘Surely, if she be at all within reach, such a yearning as this might be gratified.’

‘Perhaps so,’ Heather answered, ‘if we knew where she was; but I have never heard from her since she last left Berrie Down.’

‘Did you part in anger then?’ Mr Stewart inquired, true to his theory concerning women’s quarrels.

‘In anger!’ Heather repeated in astonishment, ‘when we all loved Bessie as though she had been one of our own household! Why she does not write to me I cannot tell, only I know she has some good reason for her silence; and I would rather not talk about her any more, or, perhaps, like Lally, I shall begin to be foolish and cry too.’ An explanation necessitated by the fact that Mrs Dudley was crying partly because of her child’s grief, and partly because she never could speak of Bessie without a feeling of bitter sorrow.

After that there fell a sudden silence on the party, during the continuance of which Heather employed herself in adjusting Master Leonard’s collar, which was crooked to an unimaginable extent; Mr Stewart read the newspaper; Lucy looked at Heather; and Mr Croft, his chin resting on Lally’s head, gazed out of the window, his thoughts wandering the while miles and miles away.

‘Do you expect Mr Dudley to meet you?’ asked Mr Stewart, when the train had passed New Cross, and was speeding on through Bermondsey.

‘No,’ Heather answered; ‘but his brother will be at the station.’

‘Oh! he has brothers.’

‘Two,’ Heather explained; and a few minutes afterwards she was introducing Alick to Mr Stewart, who looked on him not ungraciously, while Mr Croft stood a little apart, apparently by no means desirous of making Mr Alexander Dudley’s acquaintance.

'We are detaining you,' Heather said, at length, to Mr Stewart; who remarked, as he bade her 'Good-bye,' that he also was going to Lincoln's Inn Fields, and should probably arrive there first.

Then she turned and looked for Mr Croft, who, unable longer to avoid the situation, now came forward, and assisted her into a cab.

As he did so, Alick, with a sudden amazement, recognized him.

'Who is that gentleman?' he asked Heather; while the object of this inquiry followed Mr Stewart into a hansom, which immediately drove off.

'Mr Croft—Mr Douglas Aymescourt Croft. Why? Do you know him; have you ever seen him before?'

'I think I have once,' Alick answered, remembering for certain he had met that same individual rather more than twelve months previously, on the Sunday afternoon when he walked across to North Kemms church with Bessie, and she left her prayer-book behind her in the pew.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AT KEMMS PARK.

LORD KEMMS' attention 'having,' at length, 'been called' (this was the gist of a letter his Lordship wrote to the *Times*) to the fact of his name appearing in the list of directors of the 'Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited,' begged to state, not merely that he had given no authority for such use of his name, but that, when applied to for permission by the promoter, Mr Peter Black, he had, in the most unequivocal terms, refused to have anything whatever to do either with the 'Protector' or any other company. His Lordship added, that 'having failed to obtain a satisfactory explanation of the circumstances under which his name was placed upon the Direction, either from the secretary of the Company or Mr Black, he trusted the Editor of the *Times* would insert his

letter, and thus give him (Lord Kemms) an opportunity of setting himself right with the general public.'

This letter was written after a somewhat stormy interview with Arthur Dudley and Mr Black, and despatched to the *Times*' office hours before Mr Stewart's arrival in town. When that gentleman, after touching *en route* at the offices in Lincoln's Inn Fields, did reach Lord Kemms' town house, he was informed his Lordship had left for Kemms Park by the 5.8 express.

On receiving this intelligence, Mr Stewart and his nephew drove straight to King's Cross, where they caught the 7.15 to Palinsbridge, from which place they proceeded in a fly, procured at the Plough Hotel, to Kemms' Park.

Arrived there, between ten and eleven o'clock at night, Mr Stewart bade the driver wait; and then, following the butler, who stared to see visitors at such an hour, was ushered into the drawing-room, where were seated Miss Augusta Baldwin, Lord Kemms, and Mr Compton Raidsford.

'If I were inclined to quote Mr Black,' remarked Mr Stewart, after exchanging greetings with his relations, 'I should say, here we drop upon the conspirators. Now, Frank, what is all this about you and our Company? Nice dance you have led me over it! Why could you not have stopped in town till you had seen some of us, as any other human being would, I think, excepting yourself?'

'Mr Raidsford had kindly promised to dine with me to-day.'

'Very good of Mr Raidsford,' answered Mr Stewart, with a look towards that gentleman, which seemed to say 'I know all about it; 'and I suppose you and Mr Raidsford have been settling our concerns for us over your claret. We stand at opposite poles,' he added, addressing the contractor; 'there can be no doubt but that in some previous state of existence you were bitten by a company, and have had a kind of hydrophobic horror of Limited Liability ever since. Now, Frank, tell me all your grievances; what is this about your good name being taken from you?'

'It has been used without my authority,' answered his Lordship. 'I told Mr Black distinctly I would have nothing to do with his

venture, and after that he coolly went and put my name on the Direction.'

'He quite understood, I think, that you had given your consent?'

'I beg your pardon: the last interview I ever had with Mr Black, until to-day, was at Berrie Down, and I then told him nothing should induce me to lend my countenance to any undertaking of the kind.'

'It was a pity Mr Black did not take you at your word, Frank,' said Mr Douglas Croft; 'we could have done without you.'

'You will have to do without me now,' retorted Lord Kemms. 'I have written to the *Times* to say that my name was used without my authority.'

'You are confoundedly touchy about your name, if Miss Baldwin will excuse my saying so,' observed Mr Stewart; which remark Miss Baldwin apparently took as a hint that the presence of ladies was undesired, for she rose and left the room, stating, with a gracious smile to Mr Stewart, that she would not remain, and so prevent his saying whatever he liked. 'I consider Frank has been very hasty,' she added, glancing defiantly in the direction where Mr Raidsford sat; 'but I profess to know nothing of business.'

'Then I wish, aunt, you would not interfere in mine,' answered Lord Kemms; 'and, as for my name,' he went on, addressing Mr Stewart, 'how should you like yours to be put on any board of direction without your authority?'

'I should not like it at all,' replied his visitor, 'but still I should not think it necessary to go perfectly insane on the subject, as you appear to have done. Dudley tells me you stormed at Mr Black to-day like a woman; that you would not listen to a word of explanation; and that you dashed out of the office without giving either of them an opportunity of even attempting to arrange the matter with you.'

'Because Black had the audacity to tell me I did give him permission, and adhered to the statement. He first insinuated I was trying to back out of the affair, and then wished to know if some pecuniary compromise could not be effected. The insolent vaga-

bond coolly told me, "that was always the way with gentlemen,—that a merchant's word was as good as his bond, but that, unless you had everything with a swell (the expression he used) in black and white, there was no dependence to be placed upon how matters might turn out."

'Very foolish of Black to make such a speech,' Mr Stewart commented. 'You must have put up his temper by some means, Frank.'

'I made him confess he was a liar,' said Lord Kemms.

My dear fellow, how very vehement you are !' expostulated his kinsman ; 'you could not express your meaning more strongly if you were a costermonger !'

'I do not see why I should not employ the only word which thoroughly expresses my meaning, even though it be used by a costermonger also. Mr Black stated that I allowed my name to be put on the Direction. I asked him when ? He declared at the time we were staying at Berrie Down. I reminded him, that the last occasion on which we met in Hertfordshire was one day I called at the Hollow, when I told him, in Mr Dudley's presence, I would have nothing to do with the Company. Then he said, he had made a mistake—it was when he saw me at my house in London. I told him he had never seen me at my house in London—that, at the time he inquired there for me, I was in Paris. Then, he declared it must have been at Palinsbridge station ; at any rate, he knew I had promised to let him have my name, and that it was too absurd for me, after having seen myself advertised for twelve months, to try to repudiate connection with the "Protector" now.'

'And he was quite right there,' observed Mr Stewart.

'I regret to differ from you,' here put in Mr Raidsford ; 'but I cannot agree with that opinion.'

Mr Stewart looked over at the speaker with an expression which seemed to say, that it was a matter of supreme indifference to him whether Mr Raidsford agreed or not, but still he condescended to explain that 'Lord Kemms had suffered judgment to go by default.'

'Mr Black's very remark !' said Lord Kemms. 'He drew his

shoulders up to his ears, and stuffed his hands under the waist-band of his trousers—'

'Really, Frank, you are needlessly descriptive,' expostulated Mr Stewart.

'And said,' proceeded Lord Kemms, unheeding the interruption, 'you know, my Lord, it is of no sort of manner of use your kicking up an infernal row about the matter now. You have suffered judgment to go by default; and whether you intended your name to be on our board or not cannot make any difference at this time of day; so you had better let us come to some arrangement. Speaking on behalf of the other directors, I am certain the Company will do what it can to meet your views.'

'Could a man have spoken any fairer than that?' inquired Mr Stewart.

'Fairer! I never heard anything so perfectly cool and impertinent in my life!' exclaimed Lord Kemms. 'First, to use my name, and then dare to say, "I need not try to set myself right with the public!"'

'What do you suppose the public cares about the affair?' asked Mr Croft. 'To whom, do you imagine, it signifies in the least whether your name is on the Direction or not?'

'It signifies to me,' replied his Lordship.

'Why?' demanded Mr Stewart.

'Because I do not choose to be mixed up with speculations of the kind; because I refused to be associated with your Company; because I won't be overreached in this way; because other names may have been used in the same manner, and it is time promoters were taught such liberties cannot be taken with impunity.'

'Our Company is a good one—paying very good dividends, and you have risked no money in it,' suggested Mr Croft.

'Your Company may be a good one, or it may not,' replied Lord Kemms; 'but, good or bad, I won't be mixed up with it. I will have nothing to do with adventures or speculations of any kind.'

'It is a pity you were not always so particular concerning the things you connected yourself with, Frank,' remarked his cousin.

'Let by-gones be by-gones Douglas,' interposed Mr Stewart,

hastily ; 'because a man sees the folly of his ways now, there is no justice in twitting him with having been less far-sighted formerly. No doubt, Frank is right as to the general principle ; but this is rather a special case, with some peculiarities about it, which he will, doubtless, take into consideration. In the first place,' he added, addressing Lord Kemms, 'we will admit there has been some misunderstanding on the subject—'

'No,' was the reply, 'I will admit nothing of the kind. Black understood me perfectly—'

'Well, granting that he did understand you, what particular harm has his use of your name done? It is associated not with obscure Cockneys or swindlers, but with decently-respectable, solvent men, like Douglas and myself, for example. Of course, we know, we are not lords ; but still, we have a fancy we are honest, and possess some money. Our venture is turning out very well. No doubt the proper number of shares has been allotted to you. You take no responsibility—you run no risk ; by making a fuss over the affair, you will do yourself no good, and may do us considerable harm. You will take time to think over the matter, and you will, when you have cooled down a little, decide to make no public scandal concerning the affair.'

'I have already written to the *Times*,' answered his Lordship.

'But not posted the letter, I hope. Bring it here, Frank, and we will smoke a calumet of peace over its ashes.'

'Impossible ! I sent it to the *Times*' office before I left London.'

'If we had known that, we might have saved ourselves this agreeable journey,' said Mr Croft ; while Mr Stewart observed :

'Well, Frank, all I can say is, I am very sorry ; for now we shall have to fight you as best we can. Once in the *Times*, it is war to the death, you know.'

'It was not I who sought the war,' answered Lord Kemms.

'After waiting nearly twelve months, you might surely have waited another day.'

'It was only yesterday I knew anything about the matter. I happened to be over at the Hollow with my aunt, and on the drawing-room table I saw one of the "Protector" prospectuses.

Glancing at it, I knew for the first time the use Black had made of my name.'

'It is singular your friend, Mr Raidsford, did not communicate the fact to you before,' observed Mr Stewart, with a slight sneer.

'There has been a coolness between me and Lord Kemms for some time past,' interposed Mr Raidsford, 'originating in this very affair. Lord Kemms assured me he would have nothing to do with your Company; and when, after that assurance, I saw his name amongst the directors, I confess I felt both surprised and nettled.'

'And pray, sir, if the question be not indiscreet, what interest was it of yours whether Lord Kemms became a director of our Company or not?'

'It was no personal interest of mine,' answered the contractor; 'but believing, as I do, such companies to be the curse of commerce—the very death of legitimate trade—when I am asked for my poor opinion, I do not hesitate about expressing it.'

'You consider capital, then, which employs labour, which builds bridges, constructs railways, digs canals, sends out vessels, the death of legitimate trade?' inquired Mr Stewart.

'Capital, no,' was the reply; 'companies, yes—at least, limited liability companies.'

'And yet the idea of the man who brought in, and the majority which passed, the Limited Liability Act, was, that, so far from killing trade, it would foster and encourage commerce.'

'So we may conclude, or else it would never have become law,' was the reply.

'Trade has always been crippled for want of capital,' remarked Mr Croft.

'And trade always will be,' answered Mr Raidsford; 'it is in the nature of trade to find whatever capital it may have insufficient. In precise proportion to the extent of his business are a man's outstanding debts; consequently, the larger his business is, the greater are the number of his debtors. His capital, in fact, goes into his books; and instead of so much in the bank, he has so many hundreds of people owing him money.'

'The idea of limited liability was to enable a man to put a certain sum of money into a business, and have no further responsibility,' said Mr Stewart.

'Any man could have compassed the same object by *lending* money into a business,' replied Mr Raidsford; 'since the usury laws were repealed, he might have taken what percentage he pleased, and run no more risk than he does under the Limited Liability Act; but the real mischief of the present system, to my mind, is, not that large capitalists are thereby enabled to advance money to small working men, but that the large capitalists are thereby enabled to combine together, and crush the small working men. Precisely as you are doing at present: you are ruining hundreds of respectable tradesmen, and when your crash comes, as come it will, those men will not be benefited thereby; they have lost their capital, small or great, as the case may be, and must content themselves with situations for the remainder of their lives.'

'You are extremely kind to prophesy such a pleasant future for the Protector,' said Mr Croft.

'Where there are many masters there are bad servants,' was the reply; 'at least, such is my opinion. My notion is, indeed, that in a company there is no master at all; there is no one person whose business and interest it is to see that things are properly and economically conducted.'

'We have our manager,' suggested Mr Stewart.

'You have an admirably efficient manager at your works now, I do not doubt,' said Mr Raidsford.

'What do you mean by that remark?' asked Mr Stewart.

'Simply, that I should not give Mr Crossenham sixpence a week for managing any concern of mine; but, without question, he is perfectly competent to fill the position he occupies with you.'

'Once again, Mr Raidsford, I must ask you to explain your meaning?'

'Then, Mr Stewart, you certainly will ask in vain,' was the reply. 'When, eight months since, we met in Moorgate Street, you did me the honour of asking my opinion about this Company, —and I gave you that opinion to the best of my ability,—what

was your course of action? You certainly got rid of Bayley Crossenham, but you put in his shoes a man utterly incompetent to manage even his own business, how much less yours; a man, who, though perfectly honest himself, could never detect dishonesty in others. I asked you then, if Lord Kemms' name had been really added to the Direction by his authority? and it is now evident you took no steps to ascertain the truth of the matter. I counselled you to be exceedingly wary in dealing with Mr Black, and yet Mr Black is now virtually master of the "Protector," as he is of every other company with which he is connected.'

'He is not master of the "Protector,"' answered Mr Stewart.

'He must be master of its funds, or he never could have such an amount of money to spend, as is the case at present,' was the reply.

'He is no such thing,' repeated Mr Stewart.

'I am happy to hear it, for the sake of the shareholders,' answered Mr Raidsford, coolly; 'and that brings me to another phase of limited liability, viz., that this boasted union of capitalists, of which we hear so much, is, in many cases, neither more nor less than the accumulation of five and ten pounds scraped from the savings of the lower middle class; the money of people who, deluded by specious advertisements and good names, send up their post-office orders and receive their shares, and lose their cash, and thereby afford a living to a class of men who otherwise would be exercising their talents in some very different mode indeed from that of "promoting" public companies.'

'What a pity you do not go into Parliament, and favour the nation with an exposition of your views!' said Mr Stewart.

'I should not be the first man to advance them,' was the reply. 'In both Houses somewhat similar opinions have been expressed before now; of course, my views may be wrong—'

'You do not mean, Mr Raidsford, that you have ever contemplated such a possibility?' interrupted Mr Stewart.

'Yes, I have,' was the reply; 'contemplated, much more closely, the pros and cons of limited liability, than you have the Protector's chances of ultimate success. The system is rotten, Mr Stewart, and you and such men as you, who derive profit from

these ventures without incurring one halfpenny of risk, ought to be the first to confess that it is so.'

'I have two thousand shares in the Protector Bread Company on my own risk, at all events,' said Mr Stewart.

'I am delighted to hear it, in one way,' answered Mr Raidsford; 'delighted, because it proves you to be a thoroughly honest man; but sorry, because if anything do go wrong with the Company, your loss will be considerable.'

'But I am determined nothing shall go wrong with the Company.'

'In that case, doubtless you devote a considerable amount of attention to the mills!'

'Mr Raidsford, have you any specific charge to make against our manager?'

'If I had,' was the reply, 'I should go before the board and prefer it. I make no charge, but I recommend caution. I was right about Lord Kemms, you perceive.'

'We do not admit that,' broke in Douglas Croft; 'we are his opponents now, and must fight the matter out with him.'

'Or, rather, Mr Black must,' added Mr Stewart. 'He got us into this scrape, and he must get us out of it; so, remember, Frank, you are in for a paper war with one of the shrewdest men I know; you and Mr Raidsford will have to muster your forces so as to come out of the struggle with *éclat*. I am sorry it has so happened, I must confess; sorry that Lord Kemms has been—I am obliged to use a harsh word, Mr Raidsford—so ill-advised. With the best intentions, I feel confident, you have counselled him to hurry into print (a course always to be avoided, if possible), but still, you have led him wrong. Had you left the matter in my hands, Frank,' he added, 'I should myself have stated publicly that there had been some misunderstanding, and so withdrawn your name, without any fuss or anger. As it is—why it is—and there is no use in further discussion. We must now do the best we can for ourselves,' and Mr Stewart rose to depart.

'You are not thinking of going to-night?' exclaimed Lord Kemms, in astonishment; 'because we differ in opinion, we are not, I trust, to swear eternal enmity.'

‘Not with my good-will,’ replied Mr Stewart; ‘but because we have differed in opinion, I must get back to town by the first train to-morrow morning. Had your letter to the *Times* not been despatched I would gladly have remained here, instead of returning to Palinsbridge to-night; but needs must, you know; and you, Frank, are our driver.’

‘I am sorry for it, extremely sorry!’ exclaimed Lord Kemms.

‘Sorry for having appealed to the god of English breakfast-tables?’ asked Mr Stewart. ‘Come, I am glad to see some signs of repentance about you.’

‘I did not mean that; I am not sorry for having written and despatched my letter, I only regret that there should be any necessity for you to drive back to Palinsbridge to-night. But, at least, you will have something to eat before you start?’

‘It appears to me we ought not to break bread under your roof,’ said his cousin; ‘but, considering we have had nothing since we left Hastings, ten hours since, except a glass of sherry and seltzer water at Palinsbridge, I think it would be carrying animosity farther than human nature could endure, to refuse your obliging though tardy offer.’

‘For my part, I shall be very glad to accept it,’ declared Mr Stewart; ‘worry always gives me an appetite; and I should not care to be dependent on the good offices of mine landlord at the Plough, for supper. His seltzer water was as hot as though drawn from one of the Geyser springs. And will you let some of your people tell the fellow, who brought us over, to give that poor devil of a horse of his a feed? Nice creature it is; trots about three miles an hour!’

‘Will you allow my man to drive you back, Mr Stewart?’ said the contractor. ‘I shall be very happy if you will make use of my carriage.’

‘Thank you, no,’ was the reply; ‘the fly must return, and so Douglas and I may as well go in it. We are not exactly like man and wife, apt to quarrel by the way. If he were my better half, I would accept your offer at once; as it is, we will return as we came—much obliged, nevertheless.’

Then Mr Rainsford thought he must return home.

'Good-night,' said Mr Stewart; 'though your views differ from mine, I do not say but there is much truth in them. That is the worst of our imperfect state of existence, there is truth in everything.'

'Even in a promoter,' suggested Douglas Croft; and then the three shook hands with Mr Raidsford, who drove back to Moorlands thinking to himself—

'These great people are very curious individuals. If three men in my own rank of life had come together under such circumstances, there would have been hard words used, and a quarrel to a certainty. Is it that they are not in earnest, or is it civilization? One hears a great deal about civilization; is this one of its fruits? and thus pondering, Mr Raidsford returned home to the wife of his bosom, who, back from Hastings, was conducting her household on principles which seemed to the servants the reverse either of Christian or civilized.

Perhaps this fact made the amicable warfare at Kemms Park seem all the more astonishing to the contractor, who had many things still to learn, though he was so clever about business and business matters.

'If that be the way gentlemen quarrel,' he thought, 'I cannot wonder at their looking down on us; I wonder now what they are thinking about me?'

Had a little bird in the air carried what the trio were saying about him to Mr Raidsford, he need not have covered his face and shut his eyes.

'Spite of his crotchets, I really like Raidsford,' remarked Mr Croft. 'What do you suppose he meant, uncle, when he spoke about the Company failing?'

'He meant,' answered Mr Stewart, 'what I have often suspected myself,—that Black is too great a rogue to be honest, even if honesty be to his interest. Raidsford is a well-intentioned fellow, but he has not much information outside his business. Still, his ideas are worth consideration, and I shall consider them, and look up Mr Crossenham,' added Mr Stewart in a lower tone, as he went down-stairs to the dining-room, where a substantial supper was already spread.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PAPER WAR.

THE eight o'clock up express only stopped once between Palinsbridge and Holloway ; but on the occasion of that one pause Mr Stewart procured a copy of the morning's *Times*, where, occupying a prominent position, he found Lord Kemms' letter.

'It is a mercy Frank is a Lord,' remarked Mr Croft, drily ; 'for I do not think he would ever have got through the world in a subordinate capacity. The longer I live, the more satisfied I feel Providence orders these things a vast deal better than we could do.'

'You think, I suppose, Providence made him a Lord on the same principle as it makes so many poor men inventors. If an individual have not five pounds in the world, he has a patent—the compensating balance—is that what you mean, Douglas?'

'Something of that kind,' answered his nephew. 'I have often wondered how Frank would have pushed his way had he been turned adrift at ten years of age with half-a-crown in his pocket ; one cannot marvel at men like Raidsford being a little elated at the contemplation of their own exploits, when one thinks of how few people there really are in the world with any brains at all. Now, unprincipled though he may be, can you help admiring Black ? I confess, I have the very highest opinion possible of that honest individual's talent.'

'Much the same sort of talents as pickpockets and burglars are made of,' answered Mr Stewart.

'Oh ! you are wrong there,' was the reply ; 'decidedly wrong ; Black's is an administrative genius, mental—not physical. The pickpocket's cleverness is merely highly-cultivated manual dexterity, the same kind of thing that makes some women clever at fancy work, at crochet, and netting, and those fearful groups of flowers executed in Berlin wool, which my Arabella's soul delights in. A burglar, again, is merely an advanced mechanic, but Black's genius is of a very different order. He has ability to conceive and impudence to execute ; he has an immense faculty of organization ;

he would have made a good Chancellor of the Exchequer, I fancy ; his resources are inexhaustible ; his power of construction enormous. No undertaking is too large for him to fear carrying through. He puts me often in mind of those fellows at the Circus, who can ride four horses at once. He could manage fifty companies. I often think, when I am talking to Black, about what judges sometimes say to criminals, namely, that it is a pity to see such talents applied to such purposes ; in another walk of life, Black's genius ought to have carried him to eminence.'

'Don't waste your regrets upon such an arrant humbug,' Mr Stewart replied. 'Nature has fitted him into the only hole he could by possibility have filled. Black's genius is a lying genius. Had it been clothed by circumstances decently, externally apparelled with honesty, and virtue, and truth, it would soon have got rid of those encumbrances, and come forth in its primitive nakedness. I tell you Black has no talent, save for dishonesty ; if that devil were cast out of him, he would be strong no longer. As Samson's strength lay in his hair, so Black's lies in his falsehood, his cunning, his impudence, and his plausibility. Take these things from him and he would be but as other ordinary men ; honest, perhaps, but weak ; able to earn a living, but certainly not to make a fortune. It is quite a mistake to imagine because a man is clever in one walk he could be clever if he pleased in another. The walk is dictated by his particular cleverness, and Black's talent, as I said before, is lying.'

'Yet he professes to be weary of planning, and scheming, and uncertainty—'

'And very possibly that profession is true. A man may be weary of the devil which possesses him, even though he be unable to get rid of it. At one time, I confess, I thought Black was going to turn over a new leaf, and content himself with the fine things the Protector had in store for him, but now I fear the old Adam is too strong in Black ever to give him a chance of turning from the evil of his former ways, and I am satisfied if he can ruin our Company he will do it somehow. This business of Kemms' is bad too. How many shares have you, Douglas, besides your qualification ?'

‘Five hundred,’ was the reply ; ‘and I shall give my broker instructions to sell them.’

‘You do not mean that?’

‘Indeed I do ; I have no intention of losing sixpence if I can help it. I have never lost money by a company yet, and I do not purpose beginning now.’

‘But it is so confoundedly mean to desert a failing cause.’

‘I never made any pretension to Quixotism. The moment Frank said he had written to the *Times* I made up my mind to sell ; and, if you were wise, you would sell also.’

‘No ; I shall not adopt that course,’ said Mr Stewart ; but he did not tell his nephew what course he intended to adopt.

‘It will be a bad business for Dudley, if anything should go wrong with the Protector,’ remarked Mr Croft, after an uncomfortable pause. ‘He has mortgaged Berrie Down.’

‘Surely not !’ exclaimed Mr Stewart.

‘Surely yes,’ was the reply. ‘Old Craddock has advanced five thousand pounds upon it at four and a half—good interest too, I call that, on security good as the Bank of England.’

‘I wish I had heard of it.’

‘So do I,’ was the reply ; ‘but my lawyer knew nothing about the matter till it was all settled.’

‘What did he want the money for ; do you know ?’

‘Bills, I understand ; and that the sum I have mentioned will not meet the one-half of those he has out. ’Pon my honour, I am very sorry for Dudley. He will be a beggar before he is ten years older.’

‘He is an awful fool,’ observed Mr Stewart.

‘So he may be ; but folly is not a sin, is it ?’

‘It is sin’s half-brother, or whole father, or something of the kind, at any rate,’ retorted Mr Stewart ; ‘but here is King’s Cross, and now for Mr Black,’ and so saying the old man sprang as lightly from the compartment as his much younger companion ; and, bustling out of the station, hailed a cab, which speedily conveyed the pair to Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

‘Where Mr Black had already been,’ Arthur informed them. ‘He is gone on to Dowgate Hill, where, he told me, any message

would find him until one o'clock. Shall I send and ask him to come up?'

'No,' Mr Stewart decided; 'we will follow him.'

'I saw Lord Kemms' letter in this morning's *Times*,' Arthur remarked.

'Yes; his Lordship ought to have a strait waistcoat, and bread-and-water diet for a week, to teach him not to be so hasty,' answered Mr Stewart. 'Black must answer him.'

'He said, he hoped you would leave him to do so,' Arthur replied. 'He does not seem to attach much importance to the matter.'

'Does he not? I wish I could think it of no consequence,' replied Mr Stewart. 'Now, Douglas, are you ready?' and he again bustled out, and seated himself in the hansom which had waited for them.

'Mr Croft!' it was Arthur, who, following the younger man out, spoke now in a lowered tone of voice, 'do you think this will affect the Company?'

'There is no telling,' the other answered; 'only if you have many shares, take my advice and get rid of them—quietly, you know, quietly.'

'What was Dudley saying to you?' Mr Stewart inquired as they drove off in the direction of the City.

'Asking me how this would affect the Protector, and I advised him to sell his shares.'

'He has not a share beyond those Black gave him. A couple of hundred, paid-up.'

'Then, what has he done with all the money for which Berrie Down is mortgaged and to be mortgaged?'

'God knows! given it to Black, most probably.'

'Then he is virtually a ruined man.'

'Time will show,' answered Mr Stewart, philosophically. 'I do not think he will get much back from Black, at all events.'

'Those are the kind of men, then, Raidsford had in his mind, when he was speaking about companies last night.'

'Likely enough; but there were idiots in the world before

Limited Liability was thought of, and there will be idiots in the world when Limited Liability is no more.'

'Still, it does seem hard.'

'That if a man will rush into the flame he should be burnt. Do you propose, Douglas, constituting yourself a species of knight-errant to rescue distressed gentlemen from the consequences of their folly? You could never prevent a man like Dudley getting into trouble. By right, he was Black's natural prey, natural and legitimate. You do not quarrel with a cat for catching a mouse; why should you bemoan Dudley losing his money to Black?'

'I pity his wife.'

'Ah! there I go with you; but she followed her fancy in marrying him, and she must pay for the indulgence of her fancy sooner or later. The best thing which could happen for her ultimate happiness would be for her husband to get a thorough sickening of following his own courses. I consider him one of the most conceited prigs I ever met. He won't take a hint from me on any subject.'

'On what sort of subject?' inquired Mr Croft, a little curiously.

'Why, you know he might learn a little of business, fit himself for some more lucrative post, but the moment I mentioned my idea he was up like a rocket. "He did not intend to retain the secretaryship an hour longer than he could advantageously dispose of his shares. If I imagined he was going to remain at the beck and call of every one who liked to call and beckon, I never was more mistaken in my life." Whereupon,' added Mr Stewart, 'I, of course, humbly apologized; and remarked that I had certainly been under the delusion he wished to add to his income, but I was happy to find I had been mistaken; because, from my own limited experience of the expenses of living in London, I felt satisfied he could not long afford to live at the rate he was doing on a thousand a year.'

'Was not that a little—'

'Impertinent, you would say,' finished Mr Stewart, as his nephew paused; 'that is precisely what I remarked to you a few moments since—knight-errantry in the nineteenth century is al-

ways impertinent; but still, if one sees a man walking straight on to the brink of a precipice, involuntarily one shouts out a warning to him. That is what I did—and that is what I got for my pains. Now, Mr Dudley may go to the devil, for any trouble I shall take to prevent his travelling that easy road.'

'But his wife, and the children?'

'One of the children will happily never need a marriage portion,' returned Mr Stewart, 'and the other is a boy. As for Mrs Dudley, we have talked that over before; and, speaking of her, Douglas, may I inquire the reason of the special interest you seem to feel about her? A charming lady, doubtless, but still, a recent acquaintance. You are not in love with her, I hope?'

'No,' Douglas Croft answered, 'I do not love her.'

'What is the link, then? for a link of some kind there must be.'

'Perhaps that my wife dislikes her,' suggested Mr Croft; then he added, in a different tone: 'I have been a stupid ass and an awful sinner—that is the reason I like Mrs Dudley.'

'Complimentary to Mrs Dudley.'

'True, nevertheless,' answered Mr Croft; and at this moment they arrived at Mr Black's offices in Dowgate Hill, where they found that gentleman thoroughly enjoying himself.

'So you are really going to leave his Lordship in my hands for execution?' he said, when Mr Stewart had explained the purpose of their visit. 'I am delighted to hear it, for I was just sketching out a letter in answer to his. May I read it to you?'

'No,' answered Mr Stewart, 'I do not wish to be mixed up with it in any way. The matter rests between you and Lord Kemms, and we must decline all interference. Fight it out yourselves. Whether the letter ought to be answered at all, until after the next board-day, is a question for you to decide.'

'I will take that responsibility on my own shoulders,' remarked Mr Black. 'Of course, all this is Mr Raidsford's doing, not Lord Kemms'. I only wish it was Raidsford I had to answer, I would give him a dose that ought to cure him of meddling for a while again.'

'Could you not publish the formula?' asked Mr Croft; 'it might be useful to the general public.'

‘There are some medicines the success of which depends as much on the person who administers them as on the drugs they actually contain,’ laughed Mr Black ; ‘and I don’t think my physic would do Mr Raidsford much good, unless I gave it to him with my own hands. Meddling humbug ! what the deuce does he know about companies ?’

‘I suppose it is true concerning things as well as people—that we generally dislike that which we do not know,’ said Mr Stewart.

‘And a vast number of both things and people that we do,’ added Mr Black. Shortly after which speech his visitors took their departure, leaving him to finish his letter at his leisure.

Next day it appeared in the *Times*, and ran to the following effect :—

‘SIR,—In the *Times* of to-day I see (unlike his Lordship, I read the papers) that Lord Kemms wishing, for some inscrutable reason, to “set himself straight with the general public,” repudiates all connection with the Protector Bread and Flour Company (Limited). How such repudiation is to effect the difficult task Lord Kemms has set himself, he, perhaps, can explain ; but as his letter is calculated to injure our credit, I beg leave to state, first—

‘That Lord Kemms distinctly gave me permission to place his name on our Direction.

‘Secondly. That the terms on which his name was to appear were fully settled between us.

‘Thirdly. That the list of directors was published in almost every respectable paper throughout the kingdom, and daily for some weeks in the *Times* ; and that, consequently, Lord Kemms must have been perfectly well aware his name was placed on the Direction.

‘Fourthly. That Lord Kemms gave no opportunity, either to myself or our secretary, Mr Dudley, of entering into the slightest explanation on the subject. He called at the offices of the Company, in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, but only for the purpose, apparently, of indulging in a monologue, since, when Mr Dudley and I endeavoured to utter a few words concerning the question in dispute, he indignantly rushed out of the secretary’s room, declaring he

should write to the *Times*. Under the unfortunate impression that the matter can have the slightest interest for the general public, he has carried out his threat, and I am therefore compelled to request the insertion of this letter.

‘I have not the remotest idea of the source of Lord Kemms’ irritation, and can only say, that nothing could be farther from the intention of any person connected with the Company than to give his Lordship the least cause of offence.

‘Your obedient Servant,

‘Sept., 18—

‘PETER BLACK.’

Next day but one appeared another letter from Lord Kemms, stating that every ‘fact’ contained in Mr Black’s letter was untrue—that he had never given permission for his name to be published—that he had never known it was so published, until some time after his return from the Continent, when he happened to meet with a prospectus of the ‘Protector Bread and Flour Company (Limited),’ and then for the first time became aware of the use which had been made of his name. He considered that in the interests of the general public, he was bound openly to state the nature of the fraud which had been practised. He pointed confidently for authentication of his statement, if authentication were necessary, to the fact of his never having been registered even as a shareholder; and he declared he had given both Mr Dudley and Mr Black ample opportunity of explaining the line of conduct which had been pursued.

This epistle immediately elicited two in reply: one from Arthur Dudley, to the effect that Lord Kemms was mistaken in imagining he had afforded an opportunity either for discussion or explanation. ‘Not,’ added Arthur, ‘that it would have been in my power to give his Lordship any information on the subject, as I am in utter ignorance of the facts of the case; but, had this been otherwise, I should still have failed to obtain a hearing.’

Mr Black followed suit by remarking, that a nobleman who could consider seeing a prospectus ‘having his attention called,’ might reasonably be supposed ignorant of the true meaning of words, and through the whole of his letter gave his Lordship the

benefit of this doubt. Mr Black stated that though shares had been duly allotted, whilst Lord Kemms was abroad, registration of course was difficult ; that his name, failing the legal qualifications, had remained on the Direction as a matter of courtesy, since, having failed to take any steps to constitute himself a director, by attendance or otherwise, the business of the Company had been conducted without his presence or concurrence, to which circumstance, Mr Black adroitly more than hinted, Lord Kemms's ill-humour was attributable.

To these letters Lord Kemms replied in a singularly confused epistle, which branched off from the question really at issue, to vague statements concerning companies in general, and limited liability in particular. Mr Raidsford, being a much cleverer contractor than author, really did his Lordship an immense deal of mischief over these letters, and, although the editor of the *Times* kindly spared the owner of Kemms Park nearly a column of small type, and stated at the foot, 'we can insert no more letters on this subject,' thus leaving the ball with his Lordship, still that general public, with which Lord Kemms had been so eagerly anxious to set himself right, was greatly divided in opinion, and vexed in spirit as to who was to blame—whether Lord Kemms, or Mr Black, or both, or neither.

To settle the matter, there ensued a most voluminous correspondence between the pair—a correspondence which, unrestricted by any fear of the *Times'* editor, swelled out to sheet after sheet of letter-paper closely written.

A few copies of that correspondence, printed at the time for general circulation, and freely advertised in the *Times*, are still extant, and may be perused by the curious in such matters, when down for a month at the seashore, or recovering from serious illness, or at any other peculiarly leisure period.

The pamphlet was to be had gratis at the Company's offices, Lincoln's Inn Fields ; it was forwarded free by post to all parts of England ; it was made the subject of newspaper comment and private criticism, until, in absolute despair, Lord Kemms cursed the Protector, and Mr Black, and all his own kindred, and, under the shades of his ancestral trees, vowed a vow that the next time

he rushed into print he might be pilloried, and pelted with eggs, and bespattered with mud and dirt, as had been the case latterly.

But he stuck to his point ; and, although right is not always might, in the hands even of a nobleman, still Lord Kemms may have been pronounced the victor, insomuch as he contrived to do the Protector a vast deal of injury ; to shake the Company to its very foundation ; to create an enormous amount of alarm amongst the shareholders ; and to cause the directors much perplexity and annoyance.

After all, a company is very like a woman ; once blown upon, its credit is worth but little from that time forth for ever. It may demean itself with the extremest propriety ; under circumstances of temptation it may remain honest and fair-dealing, it may struggle for a livelihood, and earn one in the properest manner possible ; and yet, when all these things are placed to the credit side of the account, they shall not outweigh the damning fact that a shadow once fell over it ; that it was ‘talked about ;’ that there were diversities of opinion as to its conduct ; that there were doubts expressed as to its perfect and immaculate purity.

Thus, at any rate, affairs turned out with the Protector. By a curious feminine logic, ladies discovered that the quality of the Company’s bread was affected by the newspaper correspondence.

Heaven knows ! perhaps the fair creatures were weary of waging an unprofitable war with their servants—those real chiefs of London households ; perhaps the entreaties—very humble and servile—of Markby, round the corner, carried due weight with the so-called mistresses of town mansions and suburban villas ; perhaps the ‘cash down’ principles of the Company were too strict to suit the laxer views of people who had been accustomed to the greater freedom of a ‘six months’ run ;’ perhaps—but why go on multiplying suppositions, when the actual result is all which need be stated ?—customers fell off in abundance ; week after week a smaller quantity of bread required to be baked, a more limited supply of flour was demanded ; till at length the directors began to look gloomily in each other’s faces, and inquire ‘what business was coming to.’ The shares also decreased in value, and by the time

another half year came round, things had begun to look, as Mr Black declared, 'very blue.'

As for Arthur Dudley, he had reluctantly renewed those bills, for which Mr Black was, he considered, responsible, once again, and paid off the others out of the money raised on Berrie Down.

He did not, so he conceived, owe a sixpence in the world, and he had the property in Lincoln's Inn, his furniture and his salary, but still things were 'looking blue' with him also. When he came to cast up his year's expenditure, he discovered a thousand pounds would nothing like see him through it.

He was an honest man, as I have said before, but he had gone on spending—spending—without a thought of how all this spending was to be provided for, until the gradual depreciation of the Protector's shares roused him from his dream of security, and compelled him to look his position in the face.

Then he realized to himself, for the first time, how much easier it is to be economical in the country than in London; how much less chance there is of a person living beyond his income amidst green fields than amongst bricks and mortar. At Berrie Down, he could have accounted for every sixpence; in town, all he could clearly determine was that the money was gone—where it was gone he might have defied a conjuror accurately to tell.

Cabs here; expenses there; a luncheon with so-and-so; a dinner with some one else; a picnic at Bushey; Heather's visit to Hastings; fees to Dr Chickton. It was but a guinea now, and ten pounds again, and half a sovereign on such a date; and yet, these items mounted up.

There are only ten hundred single pounds in a thousand a year, and a five-pound note Arthur knew had often not covered his daily expenditure.

If he dare have told Heather then—if he only dare have left that miserable office of his, where he kept poring over bills and cursing impatient creditors—it would have been a comfort to the man; but there had arisen a coolness between him and Heather of late. She was either jealous or exacting—perhaps both; she ob-

jected, not by words, which he might have combated, but by manner, to his excessive intimacy with Mrs Croft.

And it was so perfectly ridiculous ! jealousy in the matter was so utterly uncalled for ! There was nothing wrong in his friendship for Mrs Croft—nothing ; therefore ill-humour, even dissatisfaction, was quite unreasonable.

If he had given his wife cause for anger, Arthur could have understood her antagonism—but without cause ? Just as though a flirtation were not fifty times harder to endure patiently than a *liaison* ; as though the external caution which the latter demands were not preferable to the flaunting boldness of that virtue which fearlessly laughs aloud while looking down into the very pit of Vice.

Sin does not, as a rule, voluntarily walk on the same pavement with injured wives, staring them out of countenance ; sin does not come to a woman's house, dressed out in the extreme of the fashion, trailing its silks and satins over carpets which are trodden by the feet of sorrowful and neglected women.

There is something to be urged against sin ! Injured husbands and wives have decidedly the best of the argument when once the seventh commandment is broken and strange idols occupy the shrines which once were consecrated to the household deities ; but against flirtation conjugal jealousy is powerless : it can suspect all things, and confirm none ; it has no cause to bring openly, even into the domestic court ; it suffers, and yet has no disease ; it feels the smart, yet can lay its hand on no open wound.

Flirtation is like a shadow : it follows you about, and still no man can lay a hand upon it ; it may dog your footsteps and disturb your peace, and yet, if complaint be made of it, you are assured it is only a fancy which is distressing you.

It is the person who complains in this case who is in fault, not the person who offends ; it is the exacting wife, or jealous husband, not the foolish man, or forgetful woman, who is to blame if domestic unhappiness accrue from an over-appreciation of Mr This, or Mrs That.

What folly to strive to keep a husband eternally at home ! What absurdity to suppose a wife is never to speak civilly to a

male acquaintance! so the defence runs, while it is not thought necessary even to keep the cause of offence discreetly in the background. The whole affair is so moral, so strictly proper, that it is never supposed possible dear John can grow weary of seeing Alonzo, nor Mary become tired of hearing Imogen's praises sounded.

There is no sin—of course not—and therefore, no harm being done, every one ought to be satisfied; only when flirting Virtue becomes, as it does in such cases, brazen-faced, the question arises whether Sin, with averted head and downcast eyes, be not the easier vanquished opponent of the two.

At all events, without for a moment insinuating that Mrs Douglas Croft was other than the most discreet of British matrons, it is open to doubt whether the most indiscreet of women could have given Heather Dudley one-half so many heart-aches as did that aimable and estimable wife.

Had Mrs Dudley been wise and philosophic, she would doubtless have reflected that Arthur, never having been a peculiarly agreeable addition to the family circle, was quite as well out of it; but then, Heather, being neither wise nor philosophic, fretted herself over her husband's defection till she almost lost her beauty. A great mistake!

She had loved this poor, weak husband, borne with him through the years, lightened his troubles, been obedient to his slightest wish, and this was the result;—that he deserted her whenever the woman who had jilted him held up her finger to beckon him back; that he forgot all his wife's faith, and truth, and tenderness, and remembered only he had once been attached to this handsome virago, whose preference flattered his vanity; who felt pleased to have this old admirer following in her train.

Well! Heather had long known she did not possess her husband's heart; and if this were a fact, what could it matter to whom he gave it?

Thus she strove to reason herself into contentment; but a woman is not the most reasonable creature in existence where her affections are interested, and accordingly, perhaps, she was, as Arthur decided, a little wayward and exacting; a wife burdened

at that time with many anxieties, amongst which, perhaps, the worst was—Lally.

For as the leaves fell, Lally had drooped, and now, when Christmas was at hand once again, the child drooped more and more.

There could be no question about the matter, Lally was very ill indeed ; far more seriously ill than when twelve months previously Bessie had ‘kissed her to pieces’ under the misletoe, and hung up holly branches over her bed.

CHAPTER XXX.

FOR EVERMORE.

AFTER her return from Hastings, Heather lost no time in taking Lally and Mr Stewart’s letter to Mr Rymner Henry.

That great man did not pay quite such devoted attention to his new patient as Doctor Chickton had considered necessary ; on the contrary, Mrs Dudley thought him a little negligent. He asked few questions ; he did not ‘take much notice’ of the child ; he was a little stand-off and ceremonious ; he was at no pains to win Lally’s heart. He expressed no opinion on the case, and declined to say how long he thought it might be before she was well.

The proximate cause of her delicacy did not appear to interest him as it had done Dr Chickton. As a narrative, Heather’s story might have its merits, so his manner seemed to imply ; but, in so far as it afforded the slightest assistance to his comprehension of the disease, she might have spared herself the trouble of repeating it.

He wrote a prescription, against his will, Heather imagined, and then he rose, signifying thereby that the interview was terminated.

‘What do you think of her?’ Mrs Dudley ventured to inquire, as she laid the fee wrapped up like the curl of which Mr Stewart had spoken, in a piece of note-paper on the table, guiltily, and as if she had committed a sin, ‘what do you think of her?’

'I should like to look at her again,' said Mr Henry. 'No, you need not bring her here; I will call some day when I am in your neighbourhood. Have you seen Mr Stewart lately?'

'Last week,' Heather answered.

'Was he quite well? Ah! glad to hear that; wonderful man; astonishing energy; wonderful—wonderful!' and, amidst these exclamations, Mr Henry cleverly manœuvred his visitors to the door of his consulting-room, where he consigned them to the care of an individual who, although he demeaned himself like an archbishop, and looked like a master undertaker, was yet kind enough to see Mrs Dudley into her cab, and tell the driver to return to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Before Heather expected him to do so, Mr Rymner Henry called. In her drawing-room, he seemed a very different individual to the Mr Henry who had been so stiff and so stand-off in his own domains.

He talked a good deal to Mrs Dudley, and some amenities were exchanged between him and Lally, who preferred a petition on her own account against any more medicine, 'for I am well now,' she assured him, 'better as well.'

'What does she mean by that expression?' inquired Mr Henry.

'Better than well, I imagine,' Heather explained. 'I do not know where she heard the phrase, but she adopted it during her first severe illness, and has since continued to use it.'

'And you think you are too well to require medicine?' he added, addressing the child.

'Iss.' Lally's speaking was still, as Mrs Ormson declared, in a deplorably backward condition.

'But if you do not take the medicine I order, you may get ill again.'

Lally turned this view of the question over in her mind, and then remarked, 'it would be time enough to have the medicine when she did get ill again.'

'Your mamma does not think so.'

'But then ma has not to take it.'

'Your mamma would not object to taking anything I ordered, if she thought that would cure her little girl,'—at which remark

Heather held out her arms to Lally, and the mother and child went through one of those pantomimes which supply the place of all assurance, as they elude all description.

Inexpressibly touching, too, become such pantomimes when the spectator knows the time during which they can be repeated is but short ; when he is quite well aware that the days are drawing near on which the child so loved, so idolized, must be laid in the arms of a colder and grimmer nurse, to be caressed and hushed to sleep, and pressed close to her mother's breast, never more, ah ! never.

And of this fact Mr Henry was only too confident. The moment he looked in Lally's face he knew for a certainty that which Mr Stewart had vaguely comprehended. The temporary improvement Heather talked of so thankfully, could not deceive his experience. He understood the nature of such varieties too well to be deceived by them ; he knew Lally was doomed, and the bright sunny November day, spite of all its delusive light and glitter, could not blind him to the fact that winter was close at hand.

For which reason he wished Mr Stewart had not sent Mrs Dudley to him. He was not a man to delude with false hopes such as Dr Chickton had held out, and yet to tell this fond, foolish mother that it was a mere question of time and cure was beyond his ability.

To refuse to treat the hopeless case, to decline ordering vain remedies, would have been almost barbarous, when the poor creature apparently believed the very strength and might of her own love could save her darling from the grasp of a foe too terrible to mention.

'It will dawn upon her by degrees,' the surgeon thought, 'there is no need for me to tell her ;' and so, after a few minutes' more conversation, he departed, utterly ignoring the fee which Heather would have pressed upon him. He would not see, or feel, or take it ; and when at length he could not avoid noticing the shy, puzzled look in her face, he said,—

'I do not come professionally, you know ; I shall only call when I am in your neighbourhood, and have a quarter of an hour to

spare. Good-morning!' and he was off, leaving Heather much surprised, and perhaps, also, a little vexed.

For it occurred to her Mr Stewart must have arranged to pay Mr Henry for his services. After her experience of Dr Chickton, and his guinea a week, she never imagined any one would take the trouble of attending even Lally gratuitously.

The child might be, as Dr Chickton had remarked, one of the most interesting little creatures he ever beheld; but even supposing Mr Henry to be of the same opinion (and Heather with all her maternal vanity and affection could not persuade herself the surgeon was anything of the kind), still that opinion need not prevent his taking a fee, since it had not produced a similarly deterrent effect on Dr Chickton.

Altogether, Mrs Dudley thought she would write to Mr Stewart on the subject; and, while expressing her obligations for his intended kindness, assure him he was depriving her of a pleasure in not suffering her to pay for anything which might hasten Lally's recovery.

She told him, truthfully enough, God knows, she would rather save and economize in every possible way, than that Lally should want for the best help money could procure. She said, what also she believed to be a literal fact, that her husband was perfectly well able to afford Mr Henry's fees; and she entreated him to allow her to send him whatever sum he had placed in his friend's hands for attending Lally.

And then, almost against her will, but still of necessity, because it was not in her nature to be abrupt or ungracious, she added some words of gratitude for all his kindness to her little girl, and 'remained his sincerely,—H. Dudley.'

She would not sign herself 'Heather,' lest the name should attract his attention, and Mr Stewart noticed the omission. He knew enough of women to be aware that, when possessed of a pretty or uncommon name, they always write it in full, and he liked Mrs Dudley too much to believe for a moment she was superior to the little foibles and weaknesses of her sex.

'She is a good girl,' he thought, as he replaced her note in its envelope; 'I wish she had married any other man than Dudley;'

after which mental remark he wrote her a few lines, saying she was quite mistaken in her idea, 'that he had not mentioned the question of money in any way to Mr Henry, and explained that, very possibly, if fees were forced upon his acceptance, the surgeon might feel a delicacy in seeing Lally so frequently as the child's state of health required. Mr Stewart added, he trusted he should on his return to town (the letter was dated from Careyby Castle) hear a good account of his little friend.'

But, long before Mr Stewart's return to London, the temporary improvement in Lally gave place to increased weariness, to weakness worse than pain, to peevish complainings of 'being tired, ma, tired;' and then, in despair, Heather looked upon Mr Henry's now frequent visits as matters of course, and began to watch his face and ponder his words anxiously and fearfully.

She did not know exactly what she dreaded; she could not bear to put it to her own soul that Lally was in danger—that Lally was incurable.

She would sit and think, poor weak heart, of those bright sun shiny days at Hastings, when the progress of her child's disease had stood still, when it even seemed to retrograde and allowed her to play on the sands, and pick up shells among the shingle, and run screaming with delight over the grass; and while she thought, she would persuade herself that change was all Lally needed, that health resided wholly out of town, and sickness solely amongst the wilderness of houses, the labyrinth of streets. That brief reprieve made the subsequent relapse seem all the harder to endure patiently; it was like the hope of a fortune held out to a beggar and then withdrawn, only to plunge him into a deeper and blacker poverty than before.

Against her own fears, Heather fought madly; she could not endure that any one should say Lally looked ill, that Lally grew thinner; she could not bear that Lally herself should complain of weariness. Her love made her at times seem almost harsh; her passionate struggle with the dread which would not now be refused entrance, made her fiercely deny the existence of danger. That which had at one time only caused her anxiety, now rendered

her nearly frantic. She grew irritable and impatient. The sweet repose of old gave place to a constant desire to be up and doing. Could Mr Henry give Lally no different medicine? should he advise taking her away? Mr Dudley's aunt was wintering in the south of France, might it not be better to try a total change of climate? She would go with her, if Mr Henry thought a different air would restore her strength; but Mr Henry declined to recommend travelling at such a season. He said the child was better at home; better in that warm town-house, with every comfort around her, than she could possibly be elsewhere. And thus things went on, till at length Lally had to be carried up and down-stairs, and lay most of the day on a sofa, drawn close beside one of the drawing-room windows, from which she could look out over the Square.

Even then Heather would not despair; she thought when once the spring came, Lally was certain to get better; she was always saying, that the moment mild weather arrived she must take her child to the sea-side, and the pair never wearied of planning the journey, of picturing the waves rippling in upon the shore, of gathering, in imagination, shells and pebbles and weed; of fancying how pleasant it would be to see the sun shining upon the waters, as they used to do—as they used—ah! Heaven.

Once again Lally took up her former cry of 'Will it be spring soon, mamma? Will it be spring before very long?' And she would repeat the same inquiry to Mr Henry, with the addition of—'And when the spring comes, shall I be well?'

The first time she put this question, Heather looked swiftly and sharply towards the surgeon, but she could read nothing from his face.

'Well,' he repeated, 'are you not well now?'

'No;,' and the poor little head was shaken in confirmation of this hopeless negative.

'Tell me where you feel ill,' he said; but Lally was incapable of this descriptive flight.

'Has she pain?' he asked; and Mrs Dudley answered, 'Very rarely.'

She would have liked Mr Henry to pursue the subject and investigate it more thoroughly, but instead of doing so, the surgeon only took up one of Lally's hands, and looked at it absently.

He knew, and had always known, that the malady which was on the child, his skill, great though it might be, could never cure. He knew the disease she had in her, call it by what other technical name his profession might, was, in plain English, Death ; and the man who shall discover a cure for that complaint has yet to be born.

He knew her body would grow more feeble, her limbs more easily tired, her poor pinched little face more pinched as the days went by.

He knew, that in the whole of the pharmacopœia, there was not a drug which might give her even a chance of life. He knew this, he had always known it ; and yet he could not bring himself to tell Heather the naked truth. He saw the woman's heart was bound up in her child ; he guessed, perhaps, that her husband was not likely to be much stay or comfort to her when the hour of trial came ; and yet, at length, he decided to speak to Arthur, to tell him his little girl was dangerously ill—ill past all hope of recovery.

Which, of course, when communicated to him, Arthur did not believe. He sent for further advice—for lying prophets, who spoke of healing when there was no chance of healing ; and softly descended the staircase, whispering peace in a house where there could be no peace.

And yet, what need was there for them to be cruelly conscientious—unmercifully truthful ! If their words broke the force of the descending blow, kept it suspended in Heather's sight, without absolutely crushing her heart, who may say that their subterfuges were wrong—their suggestions useless ?

The evil days when no telling should be required, were drawing very nigh ; and there was no one, save Arthur, who remained quite blind to their approach.

He had always preferred to ignore facts, if there were any treacherous, illusive, pleasant hope that his feeble nature could clutch. He was not one likely to believe there was any actual

danger to be apprehended, so long as he could pay the veriest quack to come and tell him the child's life might be saved. He hearkened to Mrs Croft, when she assured him all mothers were alike—so easily frightened, so over-anxious, so wearisomely careful about their petted darlings. Scoffingly, almost, she would declare, that but for these 'women's fancies' doctors never could earn a living; and she insinuated that so long as fees were to be had, it was not likely they would pronounce Lally convalescent.

Possibly, she did not herself believe the child's life was in absolute danger; but she did know, not merely that Lally was very ill, but that, by keeping Arthur so much from home, she was infusing another drop of bitterness into Heather's cup.

Had Mrs Dudley remonstrated on the subject, which she felt far too weary and broken-spirited to attempt, there can be little question but that Mrs Croft would have retorted, she, at all events, had no right to complain, 'considering my husband is continually in Lincoln's Inn Fields,' which was true, though, certainly, Heather could not be accused of encouraging his visits.

Five times out of six she was 'not at home,' and yet he haunted the house. He never seemed tired of bringing little luxuries for Lally. The fruit he procured moistened the parched lips; the flowers he sent lay on her pillow; the oldest wine in the cellars, the choicest grapes from his uncle's forcing-houses at Layford, found their way to the sick-room, which Lally now never left.

He was fond of children, this man who was childless, and Lally had twined himself into his affections. He would have done anything to save her, and he importuned Mr Henry about Lally till that great man became perfectly sick of the sight of his old friend's nephew.

Well, it was down a lane bordered by roses she went to her long home; soft hands tended her; a loving breast pillowed her; friends bore her company sorrowfully while she glided—glided adown that road, the descent in which is, towards the last, so steep and sudden.

Even Heather was deceived concerning the end, which drew nearer day by day, and hour by hour.

It was so gradual, no one could say when the change came—no

one could tell exactly when Hope finally left the house, closing the door behind her. No one could remember when the child ceased to make lamentations concerning her own sickness, and grew patient ; no one could quite recollect when it was every person about the house, save Arthur, commenced to realize that Lally—the little Lally of a happier time—might never roam again with tireless feet from parlour to dairy, from garden to paddock, of that old home which they seemed to have left so long and long ago.

There was very bitter sorrow in that dear old house ; to their business Alick and Cuthbert went daily with hearts which were heavy with grief for the little plaything about to be taken from them for ever ; the girls up from Hertfordshire could not settle to their usual occupations, but wandered idly and purposelessly about the house ; the servants crept to their work, feeling the burden of a great trouble oppressing them. Mrs Piggott could neither rest nor eat, and Priscilla Dobbin's eyes were constantly so red that Harry Marsden's remark concerning them was no long applicable. Ned took a dreary holiday to come and have a look at 'Missie,' but had to beat a hasty retreat down-stairs, where he sat in the kitchen and cried like a child ; but still death was slow about coming ; and still Heather kept her weary vigils, and still Arthur would not comprehend.

One evening, utterly exhausted, she had thrown herself on the sofa, leaving Agnes to keep watch beside Lally, when the man who acted as messenger to the company and footman to the Dudleys, entered the room, where no candles were lighted, and nothing dispelled the gloom except the fire burning not over brightly, to inform Heather—

'A young person wished to speak to her.'

'I cannot see any one,' Mrs Dudley replied.

'I told her you could not, ma'am,' the man replied. He was a very magnificent individual, who impressed shareholders wonderfully, and certainly considered himself a much more important personage than the secretary ; yet, notwithstanding his superiority over every one else connected with the 'Protector,' he had always been graciously affable towards Mrs Dudley, and now, in her

trouble, he felt very sorry for her indeed. He had children of his own, so he informed Mrs Piggott, and 'knew what it was;' whereupon he had taken upon himself to assure the stranger Mrs Dudley could not possibly be disturbed, and that he should decline delivering any message whatever to her.

But the 'young person' had been importunate—she had resolutely refused to take 'no' for an answer—and she so persistently insisted on a note she produced being given to Mrs Dudley, that Tifford at length wavered.

'If you give her that note,' the stranger asserted, 'she will see me; and if you do not give it to her, she will be sorry hereafter to know it was kept from her. I will wait outside till she has read it.' And so saying, she coolly stepped out into the night through the open hall-door, whereat she had found Mr Tifford meditating, in the midst of a silence which seemed, no doubt, to him, as great as that Harvey found amongst the tombs.

Frequently, Mr Tifford declared Lincoln's Inn Fields was as lively as a churchyard; and, at the precise moment the young woman came up and accosted him, he was thinking he might as well be buried alive as shut up there.

'You can close the door,' she remarked, noticing his hesitation; whereupon Mr Tifford at once invited her to 'step inside' and sit down, while he went up-stairs to his mistress.

The stranger stepped inside as permitted, but did not sit down; she stood on the mat, with her shawl wrapped tightly around her and her thick veil tied close under her chin, until Tifford returning bade her follow him up-stairs.

He ushered her into the dim drawing-room, and then shut the door.

By the hearth stood Mrs Dudley.

'You bring me news,' she said, 'of—' But before she could finish her sentence the stranger advanced out of the gloom, and flinging herself on Heather's neck, broke out into a passion of weeping. It was the wanderer come home at last!—it was Bessie, so long mourned, so long looked for, restored at an hour when her advent was least expected.

To Heather it seemed almost as though one had been given back to her from the grave, and for a moment she drew out of it a vague augury of recovery for Lally.

‘Bessie! Bessie!’ she exclaimed, clasping the girl to her heart; ‘Bessie—dear Bessie!’ And then there were kisses, and sobs, and low-murmured exclamations; they could not ask questions, they were so moved—they could not talk, for very excess of thronging words—they could not speak, because they had so much to say.

At length they stepped back a pace or two, so that each might look in her friend’s face.

They had been parted little more than a year, and yet how changed were both!

‘You have suffered, Heather,’ Bessie said; and then she took the dear face between her hands and turned it so that the fire-light might fall upon it.

‘Yes—Lally,’ the other answered, and her tears began to flow once more.

‘It was hearing about her brought me to you. I must see her, Heather, though she has forgotten me, of course.’

‘If she have, it must be very recently,’ was the reply. ‘How did you hear of her illness?’

‘From Ned,’ Bessie answered. ‘I did not know anything about your having left the Hollow, and went there, hoping to be able to see and speak to you alone, but I found the place deserted—oh, it did not seem like Berrie Down any longer!—and then Ned told me Lally was very ill. So, as I could not rest without looking in my child’s face—she was almost mine, Heather—’

With a sob, Bessie broke off. The past came back to her as she spoke—the past, with its sunshine, its purity, its peace. She thought of the evening Heather returned from London—the evening when this poor story opened—when she and the child sat upon the grass dividing their bonbons, and a glory lay over the landscape—a glory wrought out of the beams of the setting sun, which sank to rest as she and Heather walked slowly towards the house, talking of Gilbert Harcourt and her own future. Counted by time, that evening did not lie so very far back in the past—but

computed by events, it seemed to Bessie as though half a lifetime had come and gone since then.

It was like looking back to childhood from the confines of middle age ; it was like recalling one's youth when tottering feebly to the grave. It was so far away, and yet so near. It was as though for years and years she had been climbing to the summit of some steep hill, till suddenly she reached a point where she was able to pause and glance behind, and from whence she could see close to her, and yet separated by all that lapse of time, by all the toil and labour of the ascent, the happy valley she had left. There, steeped in the sunshine of old, were spread out before her the plains of her earthly heaven. Once again she felt the breath of the sweet west wind upon her cheek ; she beheld the westeria with its wealth of leaves ; she saw the windows of those pleasant rooms wreathed with roses, festooned with honeysuckles. There was a great peace in the air, and the woman whose face had the sad forecasting expression walked beside her over the sward.

There had been a little jealousy between them then ; but that was gone and past—passed like winter's frosts, melted like December's snow.

And this was how they met once more, with the child dear to both of them so ill, that, had Bessie returned but a few hours later, she might never have looked upon her living again.

Quietly they passed up-stairs together ; with silent feet they entered the room where Lally lay, with Agnes still keeping watch beside her.

Heather, as they drew near the bed, put her finger to her lips, as a warning for Agnes to utter no exclamation of surprise.

'I do not want any one to know I am here,' Bessie whispered in her ear ; 'but I could not rest without seeing her. How is she now ?'

'Very quiet,' Agnes answered.

Very quiet. Yes, too quiet, Bessie thought, as she bent over the child, for the great change to be far distant. Very quiet. Oh, woe ! that the little busy feet should ever have grown so idle—that the restless body should ever have become so still !

Very quiet—too quiet, for Bessie had to stoop down to hear if

she still breathed. Quiet, with the skin drawn tight over her face; with her hair, damp and thin, pushed back from her forehead; with her poor hands, which were now but skin and bone, lying listlessly out upon the coverlet, with her eyes closed and the fringed lashes sweeping her cheek; with her mouth parted a little, Lally was indeed at last very quiet—quiet enough to have contented any one who had ever thought her too full of health, and mirth, and spirits.

Silently Agnes gave place to Bessie. She took her shawl away, and removed her bonnet, and carried them to a distant sofa. With a glance Bessie thanked her, and then she turned to the child again—her child—whom she had loved, petted, scolded, kissed, and teased in the bright summer weather, and loved, and nursed, and tended, and left when the holly berries were shining above the little bed—her child of whom she had been so fond—her child who had been so fond of her, who had made such moan for Bessie, and yet who had now too nearly done with this world's loves and pleasures to be told her old playmate was returned and standing close beside her.

There was a great silence in the room. Upon the threshold stood the universal Conqueror, and already the child felt the chilling influence of his presence. With her hand clasped in Bessie's the mother sat watching; with her head resting on the pillow Bessie looked at Lally, never removing her eyes from the child's face.

On the other side of the bed stood Agnes, leaning against the wall, weary and faint; but there was no sound of weeping in the apartment; they would not sob, they would not make lamentation to vex or disturb the spirit hovering on the dark shores of Eternity's mighty ocean.

They hushed their grief, and they bowed their heads in silent prayer, and the rustle of the angel's wings—the angel who was come to fetch their darling—might almost have been heard through the stillness which abode in the room.

All at once Bessie rose, and passing round the bed, asked Agnes in a whisper,—

‘Where is Arthur?’

‘At Mr Croft’s,’ was the reply.

‘Send for him,’ said Bessie, and Agnes left the room.

After a while the rest of the family came in one by one—Alick and Cuthbert, Lucy and Laura, and the servants, Mrs Piggott, and Prissy, and Jane ; but when the silence was thus broken, the child grew restless, and then Heather motioned them to go—all save Agnes, and Bessie, who, crouched up in a dark corner, escaped observation. Time passed by, and still there came no tidings of Arthur. Once again Bessie spoke to Agnes, and again Agnes went softly down-stairs ; when she returned, she whispered that Alick was gone to fetch his brother.

With her anxious eyes Heather followed every movement of the pair, and at length she asked Bessie—‘Is it so near?’

A silent pressure of her hand was Bessie’s only answer.

‘Would you send some one for Mr Henry?’ the poor mother whispered.

‘My darling, what good can he do?’ Bessie inquired ; but Cuthbert was despatched for him, nevertheless.

Before many minutes more, however, had elapsed, the child began to move from side to side, and talk wanderingly. She moaned gently, and tried to raise herself in bed. Agnes put her arm behind the pillow, and lifted her a little. Involuntarily Heather and Bessie stood up, as though they heard and felt something approaching, and the former murmured in the very extremity of her anguish, ‘My child—my child!’

‘Don’t, Heather—don’t?’ Bessie said, in an agony of entreaty.

At sound of her voice, Lally opened her eyes wide and looked on the speaker with an expression of recognition.

Almost immediately her moaning ceased, her restlessness subsided ; there came a glimmer into her face of remembrance, and a smile—a very ghost of the old whimsical smile—played about her lips as she stretched out her little arms and said,—

‘Bessie carry me down among the blackberries, and cover me with leaves?’

Oh, Lord ! in the days when that was their pastime, who would have dreamed of so pitiful an ending to the short story !

For a moment, for her—for the child—no doubt the chamber

was flooded with golden sunbeams—without question she saw the landscape lying still and tranquil in the clear, calm, bright light of those summer evenings which had been so happy and so glad.

She beheld the trees gently waving their branches in the soft breeze ; she heard the light stirring of the wind amongst the foliage ; she saw the lawn sloping away to the Hollow, the sheep dotting the fields beyond ; she was in her home—her own very home—as she had often called it ; the past was present with her once again, and Bessie stood beside her on the smooth green turf.

The mortal sickness was gone ; the months of feeble health were wiped out ; the limbs felt tireless as of old ; pain was to her an unknown experience, weakness a thing she had never felt ; she was lithe, and active, and strong ; restless and insatiable for movement, as ever ; the game they had played at so often was to be played once more ; adown the slope they were to go, swift, and happy, and free ; adown the slope, over the grass, under the trees, into the Hollow, among the blackberry bushes, and then—

Bessie lifted the child, and laying her in her mother's arms, said, 'Take her, Heather.'

That was all—a moment after in this world there was no Lally, she had passed to the Eternal Shore.

Ah me ! ah me ! who in the days not so very long departed would ever have thought that the little comedy of Lally's life should come to hold within it so bitter a tragedy for Heather ; who would ever have fancied that the fair freckled face should wear so worn and wasted a look, that the little hands should be crossed and lie so motionless upon her breast, that the eyes should never sparkle with glee nor fill with tears again, that the sound of her laugh should never be heard more ?

No more, no more ! it all came to Heather's mind as she laid her first-born on the bed—dead. No more, no more ! and then the torrent of her grief, like a tide which has for a brief period been kept back by a feeble barrier, broke bounds and swept everything before it in a resistless flood.

No more, no more ! never to part the laurels again and peep forth from amongst the green leaves gleefully, never to stand amidst the flowers, with her little frock held up to receive the

buds Bessie showered into it, never to sit with Muff in her lap, never to kneel on the sward hugging Nep's great head, never to be in and out, out and in, never to go to the sea-side, as they had pictured, and gather shell, and weed, and pebble, never to see the spring come round again, and the primroses dot the copse. No more—no more !

Never more either to grow older and to change, never to be a grown-up daughter, never to be taught anything, never to alter, never to be either sorrow or comfort, curse or blessing in the future, never to have a bitter memory attached to her ; always to be 'little Lally,' always to be a child.

In the future there came consolation to the mother from this thought, but that future was far off in the hour when she knelt beside the bed weeping as though her very heart would break.

Somehow they got her out of the room, and Agnes stayed with Heather while Bessie dressed 'her child' for the last time, and left her, a smile still hovering on her lips, to sleep the soundest sleep even Lally had ever known.

Stealing softly down the stairs Bessie met Arthur. She had her bonnet on and veil down, so as she stood aside on one of the landings to let him pass, he did so without recognizing her.

The man was white as his dead child, and trembling like a leaf.

He had come too late ! there was no Lally now in the silent room ; there would be no Lally in any room which his feet might enter for evermore.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN BERRIE DOWN LANE.

It was all over ! Skill could do nothing more for her. Love itself was impotent now.

They brought flowers, and strewed them on her ; but their bright colours, their sweet perfume, could delight the child no

longer. They passed into the room where she lay a score times a day ; but Lally never said, 'Who's 'at?' or weakly put out her hand to welcome one of them.

Bessie might steal in at night to look once again, and still once more, at the child she had loved so much ; but Lally needed no one to sing her to sleep now—she had ceased wearying for her old playmate, and tears for her loss could trickle down her little white face no more.

Even Arthur, who stealthily and like a criminal watched his opportunity of visiting the chamber at times when no one should witness his grief—even he, with all his sorrow and contrition, could not win a word from Lally, whom he had so persistently, until the very end, indeed, declared to be in no danger.

Not from any evil intention, but merely because his vanity and his weakness were great, he had suffered himself to be led away by the still beautiful woman who had been the love of his youth. He had neglected Heather in days which he now understood must have been very dark to her ; he had seen little of his child, who lay before him with her formerly eager face cold and fixed, with her limbs still, with her hands at rest, with the bright flowers already fading on her breast, very quiet—oh ! so perfectly still.

What was Heather's grief to his—her passionate woman's sorrow to his ? She had sat with the child, nursed her, heard every word the lips now so mute had uttered, supplied every want the body, which now needed nothing, had fretfully desired. Her grief might be very terrible, very hard to bear, but there was no remorse mingled with it. Her tears might flow unceasingly, but there was no bitterness in them. She could talk of her lost one, and receive sympathy from every person around ; but Arthur—he had rarely seen Lally—he had been glad to forget her illness—he had listened to false words of comfort, and now, when his eyes were opened, it was only to look on—death.

An awful repentance had seized him when Alick, having at length succeeded in tracing his brother to one of the theatres, whither he was gone with Mr and Mrs Croft to see a new piece which at the time chanced to be creating a sensation, brought him out of the building with one sentence—

‘If you want to see Lally alive, come home immediately!’

How he ever reached Lincoln’s Inn Fields Arthur did not know. He had some faint remembrance of walking down steps, and entering a cab, and driving—it might have been for miles, or only for a hundred yards, so far as his recollection of the matter enlightened him.

The blow Tifford dealt him at the door blotted every antecedent event out of his memory.

‘Too late, sir,’ said that individual, in a low tone to Alick. ‘It is all over!’

‘What is over?’ Tifford subsequently informed his friends, Mr Dudley demanded, adding, ‘And then, poor gentleman, I told him she was gone.’

Arthur was precisely the man to feel a shock of this kind keenly; a stronger nature could never have suffered itself to be so deluded; and the servants about the house, the only people who noted his visit to the close-shut room, suspected that Mrs Dudley’s grief was less bitter than his; that her open lamentations, her fast-flowing tears, were preferable to this silent sorrow—to this tardy repentance which kept him haunting the death-chamber—dragging him continually away both from business and from rest to look on the face of the child he had only grown to love much when she needed no more love from any human being.

It has before been stated, that Arthur Dudley always rated more highly the blessings he lacked than the blessings he enjoyed, and this very peculiarity of his temperament increased the grief which his affection, and his repentance alike, were sure to produce when once affection and repentance were useless.

Never before in his life had Arthur Dudley felt so lonely and so miserable as during the week which succeeded Lally’s death. For some time previously he had been gradually estranging himself from every member of his family, and now there was a restraint evident in their manner towards him—a restraint and an awkwardness which neither he nor they knew exactly how to overcome.

In those days even Heather grew hard, and would not of her own free will speak to him as she did to others about their child, whom he had, as she fancied, neglected.

'She was mine,' the poor mother repeated, when Bessie would fain have had her talk to Arthur of Lally, 'she was mine, and mine only; he never cared for her. Even strangers—even Mr Croft and Mr Stewart, and Mr Henry—were kinder to my darling than her own father. No, Bessie, I am not unfeeling—it is the truth. He was never with me nor with her; always with that wicked, cruel woman—always—always.'

It is a curious anomaly to notice how harsh the very excess of a woman's sensibility frequently renders her.

She feels one side of a question so deeply, that there is no room left in her nature for considering even the possibility of there being another side at all. And, in that hour of mortal sorrow, Heather had no leisure to bestow a thought on any one except her dead child. Even her love for Arthur seemed blotted out in indignation at his neglect of their first-born.

And yet the iron had entered very deep into the man's soul—so deep that the day when he followed Lally to her last resting-place was perhaps the bitterest of his life.

They buried her at Fifield. Not so very far from the old home—under the shadow of the grey church-tower—they laid Heather's darling down to sleep.

'Lilian, aged six years and four months'—that was the legend her little coffin bore. 'Lilian!' No fear of offending the unities now, she was gone where names do not convey much meaning.

'Six years and four months!' She was gone, also, where age and time are not of much account either.

Poor Lally—nay, happy Lally—to have had a life at once so bright and so short, so brimful of everything which can be packed by possibility into the longest span of human existence.

Sunshine and mirth, and love and friendship, and care and devotion.

What though 'finis' was written to the earthly story after a few short chapters, say, friends, was the story less round and perfect in its symmetry for that?

Was the ending in Fifield churchyard all sorrow? Nay, rather there came a time when Heather was able to think, almost with thankfulness, of that child face which should never grow old, nor

changed, nor wrinkled, nor careworn, nor other than innocent and pure, waiting for her in that far-off land, where the 'ransomed of the Lord shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.'

All who had been so kind to her in her first illness, came to see the last they could of 'poor little Lally Dudley,' together with those who had grown fond of the child towards the end.

Alick was glad there were so many round the grave, for he felt that the presence of strangers would exercise a beneficial influence on his brother, who had been in such grief all the way down—in such sore distress for the loss of the little one he should never in this world see again.

Returning on such an errand to the old place—which he had left with high hopes of success, with almost the certainty, as he thought, of conquering fortune—would have been inexpressibly bitter to Arthur, even without the reflection that his child had died far from him—farther away than though oceans and continents, mountains and rivers, had divided them; and it needed all his strength to carry him through the ordeal bravely, and with good courage.

Mr Croft was present; but from him Alick Dudley kept aloof. Even amongst the moss-grown headstones in Fifield graveyard, he could not forget what he had seen amidst the tombs at North Kemms.

He would not break faith with Bessie; but he could not be cordial to the man, although he had been kind to Heather and fond of Lally.

Alick was able, perhaps, now to guess the reason of his fancy for the child; but that did not soften him much towards the offender.

Rather the reverse, possibly; young people are, like most women, apt to be a trifle intolerant. They are very ignorant, and they are very virtuous; their standard of right is happily high, their idea of sin is, fortunately, that it is black as night. There are two colours only for them in this world; of the delicate shades of grey into which, as the years go by, every human feeling seems ultimately to resolve itself, they have no understanding. It is

entire innocence, or entire vice—it is either devil or angel. What is the good of a man being a man, if he cannot resist temptation? where is the boasted purity of a woman, if she have ever even looked on sin?

Very nice sentiments, doubtless, and appropriate to the season and state of life in which they are generally expressed and believed. Too much toleration in the young would prove as dangerous as too many open windows in the spring; to the fleshly mansions, doubtful winds of doctrine would thus be permitted ingress. It is better for young people to continue, as their charming fashion is, delightfully bigoted, than to learn charity from practical knowledge of those temptations which make older persons question whether it be not possible for virtue to drag her spotless robes through the mire, and for vice to go through such an explanatory purification as might almost make a blackamoor clean.

And it was perfectly natural, considering his age, his character, his education, and the circumstances of the case so far as he knew them, that Alick Dudley should take the worst view possible of Mr Croft's conduct.

Had he not deliberately, and of malice aforethought, come like a wolf in the night, and stolen Bessie away—he with a wife living, too?

Well might Bessie not write to Heather (Alick was not aware that Bessie had returned to the one friend, of whose love and faithfulness she felt confident); well might the guilty creature hold herself aloof from all communication with relative or acquaintance. That Bessie had been deceived, Alick never imagined; that Mr Croft had not jumped into sin at a single leap, was an idea he would have scouted. How easy, how gradual, how pleasant are the slopes leading down into the valley where Vice holds her court, this young Joshua had no conception. He thought that every offender, every one who went so far wrong as he felt confident Mr Croft had strayed, ought to be stoned like Achan, so that he might trouble the peace of Israel no more.

Comfortable thoughts these, to fill the mind when standing beside an open grave; but they were Alick Dudley's thoughts,

nevertheless, and they made him hold himself aloof as far as possible from the man who had, he believed, first stolen Bessie away, and then striven to be kind to Lally, as a sort of offset against the shame he had brought amongst them.

He was contemptible altogether, the lad decided, too mean for him even to despise, and yet Alick would have liked to fight this despicable individual—to put some terrible affront on him—to do him a serious bodily injury—to tell him, that although Bessie was not worth fretting after, still the man who had lured her away was worth punishing.

Nothing Mr Croft could say or do, Alick kept declaring to himself, should ever induce him to grasp his hand in friendship ; and when all was over, when the body of the child who had never known of her own experience the meaning of the word ‘loneliness,’ was left to lie solitary under the shadow of that grey church-tower till the day of judgment, Alick acted upon this decision, and drawing back from the little group which clustered around Arthur, found himself walking side by side with Lord Kemms.

Heaven knows what put such a thought into the young man’s mind at the moment ; but, after they had passed through the gates, Alick suddenly asked his companion :

‘How is Nellie?’

‘Stone blind, as you said she would be,’ was the reply.

‘And I have not yet made the fortune out of which I was to repay you,’ remarked Alick.

‘I am sorry to hear it, though not for the reason you mention,’ Lord Kemms answered. ‘It would have been better, however, perhaps, for all of you had I never bought her. The money she fetched was the first your brother advanced into the Protector.’

‘Poor Arthur!’ murmured the Squire’s brother; ‘but it was not the Protector that brought us back to Fifield to-day.’

‘True,’ rejoined his companion; ‘but, perhaps, your brother’s child might have lived a little longer had she never left Berrie Down.’

‘You are wrong there, my Lord,’ Alick replied; ‘nothing could have saved her; she was dying when she left here, and it was

owing entirely to the care and skill of the London doctors she stayed with us so long. It is bad enough as it is, but we could scarcely have borne the loss had it been as you supposed.'

Which view of the case happened to be perfectly true, although Lord Kemms imagined the speaker was mistaken.

Having had a hand in damaging the Protector, his Lordship felt, naturally, anxious to prove that Company the origin of all evil.

Since, in the course of a mysterious Providence, Lally was to die, he would have felt happy to demonstrate that the Protector had, directly or indirectly, been instrumental in killing her.

Now, however, Alick Dudley cut the ground from under his feet. If Lally's short existence had been prolonged, even for an hour, by the skill and kindness of the London doctors, it was impossible for Lord Kemms ever again to insinuate that residing in town had hastened her death.

On that score, at all events, Arthur had no reason to reproach himself, which was fortunate, since when he returned to Berrie Down after the funeral, he felt his burden was quite as heavy as he could bear.

He was pressed for money; his dreams of wealth were vanishing away like mist wreaths; his shares he feared would never return him even a quarter of the sum he had expected to make by them; the half-yearly dividend had been unsatisfactory; his directors were irritable, the shareholders discontented.

He knew he must shortly let the Hollow, in order to rid himself of farming expenses, and to provide certain funds for paying the interest of the money for which Berrie Down was already mortgaged. He had not merely lost money senselessly, but squandered it foolishly; and to a man who had for so many years of his life looked honestly after sixpences, there was something very terrible in the reflection that he had got himself into debt through unthinkingly spending sovereigns.

In addition to all these causes for regret, Arthur added that peculiarity of his own temperament, which valued whatever was lost or in jeopardy far above any secure or present possession; and the feeling that the Hollow would soon to a great extent cease to be his own property, caused him to view every tree and shrub

about it, every stick and thorn, with an appreciative affection as novel as it was painful.

His love for wife, children, property, kindred, lay latent until some chance circumstance accidentally revealed its existence to himself; and most probably the first time he ever really placed a proper value on Berrie Down was when he saw it in the dead of winter, its evergreens bright and glossy as ever; its lawn sloping away towards the west, the grand old trees tossing their branches in the keen north blast, all passing away from him and his; passing away from the descendants of those who had held the place for centuries.

He meant to remain at the Hollow for the night; he had much to talk over with Ned, many arrangements to make, fifty things to see to; and so he and Cuthbert, and Mr Croft, who had declined the hospitality of Kemms' Park, were all to stay in the now deserted-looking rooms until the following morning, while Alick returned to town by the latest night-train from Palinsbridge.

It was necessary for him, if he wished to catch this train, to start away from Berrie Down before nine o'clock; and while the young man was out in the yard impressing this fact on Ned's comprehension, Mr Croft came and stood beside him.

It was a moonlight night, stormy but still fine. The wind blew great masses of clouds over the moon's face, and then swept it clean and bright again.

'You will have rather a rough drive over,' Mr Croft remarked; and Alick, backing the pony into the shafts, sulkily answered, 'Yes, it looks like it.'

'Can Ned not harness the pony for you?' was the next question.

'If he tried very hard, perhaps he might,' Alick replied.

'Perhaps he will be good enough to try hard, then,' said Mr Croft; 'and perhaps you would have the kindness to walk a few yards with me down the Lane. I want to speak to you.'

'To me?' repeated Alick, in surprise.

'Yes; to you, particularly,' was the reply.

'I will bid Arthur "good night," and be with you directly,' the other agreed; and accordingly in a few minutes Mr Croft and he

were walking along Berrie Down Lane, past the pond, and under the elms and beeches that sheltered the road beyond.

'There is bad blood between us,' began the elder man, after they had paced on for a short distance side by side in silence. 'There is bad blood between us, and I am sorry for it; but it is natural that you should both dislike and distrust me.'

'Was that what you brought me here to say?' Alick inquired.

'No; consider it as my opening sentence,—the stamp with which I have broken the conversational ice; now I can go on. You remember, of course, where you first saw me?'

'It is not likely I should soon forget such a pleasure,' was the reply.

'You are satirical, but I am shot proof,' Mr Croft remarked; 'you recollect, then, that Sunday afternoon in North Kemms' church, and the girl who kept her eyes fixed so demurely on her prayer-book, which I had afterwards the happiness of restoring to her?'

'And in which you placed a letter,' added Alick.

'And in which I placed one of a series of letters,' amended Mr Croft; 'good—you remember her?'

'As well as I remember you,' was the reply.

'Where is she now?'

The moon sailed out from behind a cloud, as suddenly and sharply Mr Croft put this question, looking full in Alick's face while he did so.

'Where is she now?' the younger man repeated, 'why, do *you* not know?'

'If I did, I should not come to you for information. Listen to me,' he rapidly proceeded, 'I would give my right hand to know where she is. I would give a man anything almost he liked to ask, if he only proved to me she were alive and well. You were fond of her, were you not, boy? it vexes you to hear that there is no one belonging to her, no one on whom she has a claim—not even myself, who can say where she is, whether living or dead; but what is your trouble to mine? When I looked in your face a moment since, my last hope vanished. I thought perhaps she might have gone to Heather—to Mrs Dudley, I mean.'

‘Would you have me understand that she never went off with you?’ Alick interrupted. He stood still in the very middle of Berrie Down Lane as he spoke, and the shifting light gave a wild, curious expression to his face. ‘Do you think I am so simple as to believe—’

‘My dear fellow, I do not think you simple, and it is immaterial to me what you believe; but I want to know where your cousin is to be found. I desire, at least, assurance of her safety, comfort, and—should such a miracle be possible—happiness.’

‘And by what right do you dare to ask anything about her,’ demanded Alick; ‘you a married man, you who never ought to have written her a line, or met her, or—or—’

‘I did not beg you to walk on here with me to-night in order to answer your questions,’ Mr Croft interrupted; ‘my object was merely to put one or two of my own. To my first, your face has already replied. I see you know nothing of your cousin’s whereabouts. If you should do so, will you at all events let me know that you have heard from or seen her, and that she is well?’

‘No,’ Alick Dudley replied, ‘I will not.’

‘That settles my second question,’ observed Mr Croft. ‘Now, the last point on which I desire information is this: does Mrs Dudley know we have met before, and where?’

‘She knows I have seen you,’ was the answer; ‘but I have not told her when, or where, or what I suspect.’

‘That is to say, Mrs Dudley does not in any way connect me with your cousin’s disappearance?’ Mr Croft remarked inquiringly; and when Alick answered in the affirmative, he proceeded:

‘Will you still respect my secret, so far as you know it?’

‘I shall make no promise,’ Alick answered.

‘At least, will you let me tell my story for myself?’

‘There is nothing to prevent your doing that,’ the other replied, ‘any more than there is to prevent my telling mine.’

‘You are sternly uncompromising,’ said Mr Croft.

‘I should be sorry to compromise with a seducer and a villain,’ was the reply.

‘You are talking at random, boy, on a matter concerning which you know literally nothing,’ the person so politely addressed

observed, sadly. 'Had I spoken to an older man, as I have spoken to you to-night, I should not have been so repulsed.'

'Possibly not by an older man like yourself,' retorted Alick, with a sneer.

'Good night,' said Mr Croft, 'we will not spoil our naturally sweet tempers by further argument. Here comes Ned. Shall we shake hands over it? No; good-bye then, and pleasant thoughts as you travel to town. Some day you will think you have not been all in the right in your judgment of me; but I do not quarrel with you for that judgment. It is human to err, and your humanity has erred, perhaps, on the safest side. On a safer side than mine, certainly,' he muttered, as Alick, jumping up beside Ned, took the reins, and, with a cold farewell to Mr Croft, drove off at a rattling trot along Berrie Down Lane, and thence through Fifield to Palinsbridge.

As they passed Fifield church, the moonlight fell clear and cold on the mound of freshly-turned mould, which was heaped over the spot where Heather's darling lay all alone, and the tears came welling up into Alick's eyes when he thought of the dead child.

Any one might have imagined that such tears must soften the heart, and render it for the time, at least, pitiful and tender even to a sinner; but no such change was wrought on Alick Dudley's mood.

All the way up to town, sitting in a corner of the compartment, he pondered over his interview with Mr Croft—pondered and wondered; but it never once occurred to him that perhaps he had judged the man harshly, that he had repulsed his semi-confidence very rudely.

He was a sinner—he was all Alick had said; over and over again the youth kept repeating these statements to himself; over and over he found it necessary to refresh his spirit with them, for his conscience did not feel quite satisfied concerning the interview.

Still he had done right, and though the right might be unpleasant and ungracious, it was nevertheless necessary to be performed. Young though he might be, Alick Dudley knew enough of human nature to be aware Mr Croft was for some reason or other in very grievous trouble: to be confident, he never would have spoken to

him had the subject not been one, as he implied, of vital importance to his peace ; but what of that ? If he were in trouble, so much the better ; if he were anxious and grieved, it was nothing but what he deserved.

He had been kind to Lally, it is true ; but, again, what of that ? In the eyes of Alick Dudley, Douglas Aymescourt Croft seemed the incarnation of evil, of hypocrisy, of treachery, and of sin.

With all his heart and with all his soul, Alick hated the man—hated him all the more, perhaps, because he felt quite confident, if Mr Croft once told his tale to Heather, he would deceive her also somehow, perhaps even move her to pity.

And Alick held in those days the pleasant creed, that no human being who went wrong should ever be pitied. Not even the look of Mr Croft's face, as he stood eager and anxious, waiting for Alick's answer, had been able to soften the youth. Rather, in his stern rectitude, he now blamed himself for having been over-lenient, for having been unduly tender to this wretch who had deceived Bessie, and wrought for her perhaps such misery as he himself was unable to contemplate calmly.

Out and away with him ; on a gallows as high as Haman's, Alick would willingly have hung him ; and, after all, to come to me ! thought this modern Joshua—to come to me !

Ay, there was Mr Croft's mistake ; perhaps he never had been very young himself, or perhaps the feelings of his youth lay so far back in the book of years, that he forgot how stern and hard young people, who can be trusted, usually are in their judgments. Be this as it may, the result of the interview had proved different to what he expected, and he returned to the Hollow, smiling a little bitterly as he thought time would teach Alick Dudley a different lesson ; that possibly out of his own experience he might after a while acquire a little toleration in judging of others. And in this idea, who may say Douglas Croft was wrong ?

True, it is only God who, knowing all about our sins and our temptations, is ever entirely merciful ; but still, the more men learn of their own natures the more fully they come to comprehend how easy it is to do wrong, and how difficult to do right ; the closer they form an acquaintance with that lore which nothing

except sorrow, and trial, and trouble, and experience can teach, the greater is the toleration with which they regard error; the greater is the diffidence which they feel about affirming of any human being, 'In the sight of the Almighty, you are a very grievous sinner.'

In precise proportion, as a man towards the close of his life is harsh and bitter, as he views with loathing not the crime but the criminal, as he ventures to pass severe judgments on his fellow-creatures, so we may be certain his earthly education has been wasted.

It is natural for the young to air their indignation; natural and right, for they cannot conceive the power and might of those temptations which are strong enough to lead wiser people than themselves astray; which meet poor humanity like an armed man; which lurk like lions in the path, yea, are 'like lions roaring on their prey.'

In the young, it may reasonably be hoped that intolerance is an outward and visible sign of inexperience and innocence, but in the old and the middle-aged it can be regarded but as a token of folly, as a sign of a Pharisaic rather than a humble spirit; of a mental constitution swift to forget personal sins and to notice defects in others; of a bigoted proneness to measure the corn of all men's lives out of one bushel; of a pompous giving thanks to God for having made some people so much better than that poor, low, wretched, tabooed publican; of a disposition ready to find a mote in a brother's eye, forgetful of the beam which was so utterly displeasing in the sight of Him who has with his own lips assured us, that 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.'

CHAPTER XXXII.

WOMAN TO WOMAN.

FEMININE curiosity, we may take it for granted, is sometimes less keen than feminine grief. If it were otherwise, in what way, I pray you, should any one account for the fact, that some weeks passed away, from the night of Lally's death, without Heather Dudley knowing all the particulars of Bessie's existence from the hour when she left Berrie Down till she reappeared in Lincoln's Inn Fields?

In truth, the mother's sorrow was very terrible; so engrossing, that it nearly deadened all desire to ascertain the particulars of another human being's life; besides which, there was a mystery about Bessie—a mystery Heather, in the midst of her grief, intuitively felt chary of intruding on. She wished no one to hear of her return; she came at night to Lincoln's Inn Fields, and was admitted privily by Tifford, whom probably she had bribed to secrecy, for none of the other servants ever heard of her visits. She wore a ring, a golden wedding-ring, and yet her face was not the face of a happy woman. She volunteered no particulars of the events which had intervened between the time when she stole away from the Hollow like a thief in the night, till she returned to see Lally before she died. She was sweeter than of old, but she was also sadder, and her beauty, neither dimmed nor diminished, was yet changed.

All these things Mrs Dudley beholding, even through her tears, might have marvelled at, though she never inquired into them, until one day there arrived a note from Bessie, saying, 'I can tell you no more, dear Heather, unless you will visit me. Come to me once, at all events; I want to speak to you, and I want to show you something.'

Dressed in her deep mourning, Heather repaired to the address given—a first floor in Roscommon Street, Pentonville.

What a mean street it was—what small, close rooms that pretty Bessie had selected; and yet, when Heather came to sit down

beside the fire, with her old friend's hand clasping hers, she forgot all the words of remonstrance she had intended to speak, and listened to Bessie's sorrowful apologies.

'It is not exactly the kind of parlour I should have liked to ask you to spend a day in, Heather,' she said; 'but beggars, you know, cannot be choosers; and I wanted to talk to you so much—so much—and to show you something, if you do not mind.'

'If I do not mind!' Heather repeated, wonderingly.

'Yes, sweet—my child!' and, with the colour mantling in her cheeks, Bessie went into the next room, her bedchamber, and brought thence a baby—a great, staring, fat baby—with pink feet, and arms that looked as though cord had been tied tightly round the wrists, so deep were the rolls and wrinkles of flesh, so high the mountains and so deep the intermediate valley.

Is it necessary for me to describe what followed during the course of the next ten minutes? What woman is there who does not know exactly how Heather took the little fatuous-looking lump of mortality to her heart and cried over it; who cannot conceive how Bessie, sitting on a low stool, gazed at the meaningless features of her child, which cooed and clung to Heather, and dabbed its fists in her face, and crowed with delight at the sweet eyes bent upon it, and kicked in an ecstasy of infantile excitement at all the notice 'mamma's company' was taking of mamma's autocrat.

Of course there was weeping. Heather could not so soon forget her own first-born as to forbear shedding tears at sight of Bessie's baby; and then Bessie cried, and, finally, the autocrat yelled, which ebullition of feeling did more towards restoring the mental equilibrium of the two ladies than one of the Church homilies or a charge from the Archbishop of Canterbury could have done.

And still Heather asked no questions, while Bessie, having brought in her boy's cradle, sat rocking him to sleep. Mrs Dudley, spite of that child, the mean lodgings, the tangible wedding-ring, refrained from cross-examination. In an earlier part of this story, it has been stated that Squire Dudley's wife knew when to keep a discreet silence, but it has not been stated that she frequently did not know when to speak.

She was sensitive to a fault ; and so now, though she felt dying to know, and Bessie sat longing to tell, there ensued a silence which the latter at length broke with—

‘Heather, why is it that you have never reproached me? how does it happen you had not a single hard word—nothing but love, and tears, and kisses for me, who repaid your kindness with such bitter ingratitude?’

‘My darling! why should I reproach you?’ Heather answered. ‘What am I that I should be hard upon you, *however it may be?*’

‘And how do you think it is, Heather?’ asked her friend, turning from the child, now fast asleep; ‘what is your opinion about the matter?’

‘I would rather not form any,’ was the reply.

‘But you must, dear,’ Bessie declared; ‘you are thinking even now about me. What is the conclusion at which you have arrived?’

‘I was only marvelling!’ Mrs Dudley answered. ‘If you are married, where is your husband—why are you here? if you are not married—oh! Bessie, sweet, forgive me!’

‘Forgive you, Heather!’ Bessie answered, ‘forgive you! If you think even the implication of such a misfortune so hurtful to me, what will the reality prove to you, Heather? I am not a married woman, spite of this—and this’—she pointed to ring and infant—‘I am no more married in the eye of the law than I was when I left Berrie Down!’

‘God help you!’ Heather murmured, softly.

‘Ay, God help me, indeed!’ Bessie repeated. ‘Sometimes, sitting here alone, I think He has dealt with me very hardly; but, then, I look at my child and grow patient. I want to tell you my story, if it will not weary you.’

‘Weary me!’ Heather exclaimed.

‘You do not draw away from me—you do not regard me as a pariah,’ Bessie continued. ‘If I were to go to my mother now, and tell her what I am about to tell you, she would order me out of the house, and address me for ever after with the door-chain up. Do you understand me clearly, Heather Dudley?’ she said, almost impatiently. ‘I am not a married woman, and yet I am a mother!

Shall I fetch your shawl and bonnet and send for a cab, and bid you farewell for ever? Don't you hate to touch me? Is the room not oppressive in which I breathe the same air with you?' and, as she spoke, Bessie rose excitedly, and would have moved farther away but that Heather caught and chid her for her want of faith.

'I am your friend, love,' she said in the low tone which had such a virtue of healing and leisure in it—'not your judge. We are woman to woman now, Bessie, tell me what you will.'

Then Bessie, flinging herself on her knees, buried her face in the folds of Heather's dress, and sobbed aloud. 'I have sinned,' she said, 'I have sinned, but not willingly; my greatest guilt was my deceitfulness, my sly ingratitude.'

'You were deceitful,' Heather answered. 'Oh! Bessie, how could you, how was it possible for you, to engage yourself to Gilbert Harcourt, caring, as you must have done—'

'Heather, you are wrong,' broke in Bessie; 'I was engaged to Gilbert Harcourt before I ever saw the—the—father of my child. You know what a life I had at home; you know any life would have seemed preferable to that. Across it in an unlucky hour Mr Harcourt walked. He fell in love with me—he was a good creature and a kindly, and so, though I did not care for him in the least, I said yes when he asked me to marry him—said yes, prompted and badgered thereto by my mother, and so became engaged.'

'What is the idea of the world in such matters? Is it not almost that a woman engaged is a woman married? Such was my idea, at all events; but I wearied of the tie before long; it is hard always to remember one is engaged to a man for whom one does not care two straws. That was my case with Gilbert Harcourt. I tried hard to like him, but I failed; my sin as regards him was ever promising to become his wife, not in breaking my promise; is it not better to part even at the altar-rails than to take false vows before God? I played a double game for months and months—there was my error; but I was a coward, and I dare never have faced my mother had I told her my repugnance to marrying the suitor she favoured; besides, my other suitor did not come forward. Oh! Heather, Heather, I felt so miserable and so

wicked down at the Hollow, I felt so deceitful and false amongst you all. My love, had *you* been my mother, I never should have been sitting here to-day, a wife, and yet no wife; had you not been my friend, God only knows where I should have been to-day, perhaps dead, perhaps living in sin, certainly not here, struggling feebly to do right, to atone for my transgression, striving to forget the only man I ever loved, Heather, the only man I ever loved.'

She put her hand to her head and moaned as she spoke—moaned like one in some bodily pain.

'Bessie,' whispered Heather, bending low, 'don't speak to me about your trouble, dear, if it pains you to do so. I do not require to hear—'

'But I require to tell you,' Bessie broke in vehemently. 'We met, he and I, after I was engaged to Gilbert, where do you think, Heather? in a railway carriage, and he never spoke to me, and I never spoke to him, for forty miles, while the train rushed on to the lonely country place where I was travelling to spend my Christmas—the Christmas previous to that I passed with you. Mamma and I had quarrelled that morning, and, in consequence of our quarrel, I missed the train by which my friends expected me; the result of this was, that when I arrived at Thirkell no one met me, and there I was stranded at about nine o'clock of a winter's night on the platform of a lonely country station, where such a luxury as a fly was unknown, and the parsonage whither I was bound three miles off.

'Had it not been for the manner in which I parted from my mother I should have returned to town by the next train due at Thirkell, the station-master informed me, at 10.25 p.m. As things were, however, I decided on making the best of my way to Holston Vicarage on foot, protected by a porter six feet high, who declared his willingness to take charge of me.

'All this time my travelling companion was engaged in sending a telegram to town, to which he said he should wait an answer, and "in the mean while," he added, turning to me, "if you are not afraid of the cold, my man can drive you over to Holston and be back here quite as soon as I shall require him."

‘What should you have done under the circumstances, Heather?’ dropped a pretty curtesy and answered—“Thank you, sir, but my mamma would not be pleased if she heard of my accepting any civility at your hands, and as I am a good child and like to do what my mamma tells me, I will walk, if you please, all along the dirty lanes to Holston, and make myself as uncomfortable as it is possible for a human being to render herself?”

‘That would have been proper, would it not, man being woman’s natural enemy? I, however, preferring impropriety to discomfort, accepted his offer, was helped by him into a dog-cart, which seemed to me about five storeys high, thanked him, bade him good-night, and in twenty minutes was set down at the door of Holston Parsonage, when, of course, my friends had quite given me up. Oh! dear,’ Bessie sighed, ‘oh! dear, to think that so simple a thing should be the beginning of so much trouble!’

‘And after that—’ Mrs Dudley suggested.

‘After that, how did we meet?’ the girl replied; ‘the first time it was on the road, and we bowed; next time, we spoke. The people I was staying with were old as the hills, and never took a walk by any chance. I did, unhappily; and so at length it came to pass that we—he and I, met on the downs, in the lanes—sometimes here, sometimes there—but still constantly. I think,’ added Bessie, ‘we both fought against our wish to see each other in those days—I know I did—I know I chose each morning I went out a different path, but let me go which way I would I met him.

‘At last, I thought I had better return to town, but he followed me to London. Can you fancy what it was, Heather, to return to that horrible engagement—to the sight of a man now grown positively distasteful? No, you cannot, love, I know; God forbid you should. What next? we met in town, we met at the sea-shore; and still I did try to avoid him. You believe me, Heather, I did strive with all my heart to do my duty to Gilbert and forget the other, but it was impossible; I loved the last, I had grown absolutely to dislike the first. It was no negative feeling I had for my affianced husband then, it was active aversion. Oh! Heather, then came the part of my life I hate to look back upon. I was not honest, I was not open. When in a fit of re-

penitance, for such I know now it must have been, he disappeared from Southend, where we were then staying, I never told Gilbert I was changed. I let him come on—on—I allowed them all to talk about my marriage; and I meant to marry him, loving the other all the time, and only angry at his having, as I considered, deserted me.'

'Did he—did the one you were fond of know of your engagement to Gilbert?' Mrs Dudley replied.

'Ah! Heather, do you think there was anything I kept from him?' Bessie answered; 'and, if I had not been the stupid goose I was, his manner might have told me there must be something wrong. He listened to me, and he thought the affair over, as it seemed, in his mind; and then he begged me to give Gilbert up, but he never said, "I will come forward and shield you from the storm you dread." No, he only said, "If you love me, you will have nothing to do with him." But I was afraid, afraid of my mother, afraid of being found out, afraid of our being parted, and I had never seen any good in all my life, and how could I be good and firm—how was it possible?'

'My poor child! my poor darling!' Heather murmured.

'You do not know Southend,' Bessie said, looking up in the face which was bent down over her. 'You do not know Southend. People tell me it is not a nice place, but it was as the kingdom of heaven to me. There are walks along the shore to Leigh, and walks beyond Leigh to Hadleigh; there is a way along the shore to Shoeburyness, and there are delicious field-paths leading to farm-houses, which seemed to me the very abodes of peace and contentment. Oh! those days—those sunshiny happy days! You are crying, love, what is it? Are you sorry for me? I was a poor weak treacherous girl; but so happy, darling, so blessed!'

And Bessie covered her face with her hands, and the tears came trickling through her fingers. They had indeed been happy days, but they were gone, and she sat weeping for the bliss which had been; whilst Heather, thinking of the sunshine and bliss her own life had lacked, could not choose but weep also.

'Then suddenly he went away,' Bessie resumed, 'and soon afterwards I came to stay with you; in your house I learned that

summer my alphabet of a better life. Unconsciously, women like you, Heather, mould and purify other women ; you are as the salt which salteth the earth—you are as the leaven hid in the three measures of meal—'

'Stop, Bessie dearest,' entreated Heather. 'Have not you, even you, said within this last fortnight, I was hard to my husband, and I have been hard and unsympathetic, and wrapped up in my own grief. Lord, pardon me?'

'But I did not mean that you were really hard,' Bessie declared ; 'only that you were not quite the Heather you used to be—the Heather who thought of Arthur before she thought of any one else—there, there—I must get on with my story or I shall never finish it. Where was I?—growing better—when *he* came after me once again, praying, pleading, assuring me, both by word of mouth and by letter, that it could not be right for me to marry a man I disliked ; that if I persisted in keeping to my engagement, I should be preparing misery for myself, for Gilbert, and for him.

'But still, he never said, "I will come and claim you from him"—never once.

'How I strove to keep my engagement you may, perhaps, remember ; but when he saw I was determined to keep true to my promise, he grew desperate, and would have had me risk everything and go off with him then. He explained that he was placed in a difficult position in consequence of his father, on whom he was dependent, wishing him to marry a rich widow ; and, of course, I was not so selfish as to desire that he should beggar himself for my sake ; so we parted again. Oh, Heather, I did not sink without many a struggle, many a frantic effort to touch secure ground. Everything he told me was false, even to his name ; for he assumed that of a cousin the better to deceive me ; but I loved him then as I love him now ; and then as now. I found it hard to see a fault in him.

'At last I could bear it no longer, and left with him as you know ; we were married next morning at a church in the City—he had been residing in the parish for the requisite period—and, as we drove away from the door, I saw my father walking along the side-path. I could have put out my hand and touched his

shoulder, but *he* prevented my speaking to him. He would not let me write to you or any one. He said some day he would avow our marriage, and, till then, I must be patient ; and I was patient. I never wearied him. I never even felt fretful ; if he had asked me to go to Iceland with him, I would have done it. I would have died for him.

‘We were so happy,’ she continued, after a pause ; ‘we had the loveliest cottage you can imagine in a distant county ; and, though he said he was poor, I never felt any shortness of money ; we never seemed to have anxiety about providing for the morrow’s wants. My only trouble was his frequent absences ; but still, spite of these, he spent a considerable part of his time with me, and he grew to know you and Arthur, and Lally, and the girls, as though you had all been members of his own household.’

‘You have more to tell me,’ Heather said, as Bessie paused.

‘Yes,’ was the reply ; ‘I have, the end of my story. One day, when we were out together, we met a gentleman whom my husband greeted with a certain annoyance and restraint. They seemed very familiar and intimate ; but, still, Maurice—I always call him Maurice—did not introduce his friend to me, nor invite him to our house. After he left us, I asked his name.

“Oh, that is my rich cousin,” Maurice said in reply. “I hope he did not guess who you are.”

“Why, would he tell your father ?” I asked, and he answered “No ; he did not think so. He believed him to be a better fellow than all that came to ; but he is a canting idiot,” he said, “and has got so many strange ideas. If he should happen to call, you must not see him ; remember, you must not, Bessie !”

‘I promised him that I would not, and I meant to keep my promise ; but a fortnight afterwards—when, my husband having gone up to London, I was alone—this man stepped, without any announcement whatever, through one of the front windows opening into the garden, and, after very briefly apologizing for his intrusion, and the fright he had caused me, commenced one of the most dreadful sermons you ever heard, Heather, and wound up by inquiring “whether I had ever considered I was going down into hell and dragging his cousin there with me.”

‘Thinking he was mad, I humoured him at first ; but, after a time, finding there was a wonderful coherence in his discourse—that it was, in fact, too stupid to be the speech of a madman—I asked him, plainly, what he meant, entreating of him, in the same sentence, not to tell Maurice’s father of his son’s marriage ; for that fear of bringing unhappiness on my husband was the only grief I had.

‘Then it was his turn to look bewildered. “Father—son—husband—Maurice !” he repeated in blank astonishment. “My cousin’s name is not Maurice, and has no father living. May I ask pardon if you are *married* to my—the gentleman I—met you with the other day ?”

“Certainly,” I answered ; “do you think I should be here if I were not ?”

“Then,” he said, “it is my duty to tell you my cousin has most grossly deceived you. The marriage is not, cannot be, a legal one ; for, to my knowledge, his wife is alive at the present moment.”

‘After that,’ proceeded Bessie, ‘there is a blank in my memory—I suppose I fainted ; it was a fearful blow to receive, but the man who dealt it stayed with me for nearly an hour, and was very kind and thoughtful towards me. He did not call the servants ; he made no fuss ; he threw a little water on my face, and let me struggle back to consciousness without drawing the attention of any one to my trouble. When I was quite recovered he begged my pardon for the mistake he had made in the first instance and assured me, I think truly, that, had he guessed for a moment the depth of his cousin’s treachery, he never would have been so abrupt.

“But I spoke to him in his own house about you the other day,” he added, “and he bade me mind my own business, and not interfere with his—who you were or what you were, he said, was his concern, and his only. So then I determined that you should not perish eternally for want of a word spoken in time.”

‘I let him go on for some minutes—I let him preach to his heart’s content, and then I said :

“You have told me his faults—now show me his excuse.

He was forced to marry against his will. His wife is old, ugly, ill-tempered. He never loved her; it was a marriage of convenience, which he was compelled into by others."

"He knew what I was thinking of—he guessed I was seeking an apology to stay with him. He had sense enough to see I would have given life itself to hear his wife was a hideous old shrew. He had not human feeling sufficient to understand my mad jealousy, but he could not help seeing it was not accusations against my husband I wanted to hear. Oh no! it was the defence I was panting for.

"“He married young,” was the reply, “a lady of equal age, well born, wealthy, beautiful, accomplished, virtuous. They do not live happily, it is true; but she was his own free choice. He was rich and independent enough always to marry whomsoever he pleased.”

"“And his real name?” I asked.

"Then he told me, and then only I fully understood how cruelly I had been deceived—what a tissue of falsehoods his story had been from first to last, from beginning to end. He had passed himself off to me as the man who now sat explaining the depth of my misery to me. I showed him the certificate of my marriage, and he said, “Yes; according to this the bridegroom was myself. What shall you do now? You will not, I trust, make the matter public, nor think of prosecuting him.”

"Prosecuting him! I stared at him as I repeated the words. Bring trouble to the man I loved! What did he think I was made of, I wonder, to expect I should turn in a moment like that? Husband or no husband, he was still dearer to me than anything on the face of God's earth; and so I told this bearer of bad tidings, who then seemed to fear I should fall, as he expressed it, into deeper sin; that my beauty—he had the grace to admit I was beautiful—should prove a worse snare than ever to his cousin, a lure of the devil to trap him to destruction.

"I could not bear any more after that. I asked him if he were a clergyman, and he said no; that the sect to which he belonged approved of lay preachers, and that all men were ministers whom the grace of God moved to speak His word.

“And do you imagine such lecturing will do me any good?” I said; “do you not know you are taking the most likely means to make me remain where I am? Do you consider it is a light trouble which has befallen me? Do you expect me to feel grateful to you for bringing news which has utterly destroyed my happiness?” for I was so happy—so happy.

“Sinfully happy,” he said.

“At that I fired up. Where was the sin, I asked, when I knew nothing of it? Why could he not have left me alone, now the thing was done and past, and that no act of mine could undo it? Why did he come there? I raved, I think I must have done, for at length he said he would leave me for a season, and return the next day when I grew calmer, and more willing to listen to the voice of consolation.

“Meaning yours,” I suggested.

“I will help you, if you permit me,” he answered; “help you with advice—money to go back to your friends.”

“No,” I said, “you will not. You have done what you consider your duty; and, if I do not thank you for your misjudged kindness, it is only because I find it difficult to speak ordinary words of courtesy when my heart is broken. There is nothing more you can do for me—all the rest lies between him and me—between him and me and God, and in the bitterness of our future no man shall meddle.”

“As you wish,” he answered; “only tell me one thing more: have you friends to whom you can apply for assistance? I only ask that I may feel you are not quite desolate.”

“This touched me a little. “I have one friend,” I said, “who would not, I know, turn from me in any distress or difficulty.”

“And that friend——”

“Is a woman,” I finished, “and one not of my own kindred nor of mine own house; but I shall not go to her, and what I mean to do I shall not tell you.”

“He turned and looked at me doubtfully; then he said, “May I call to-morrow?” to which I answered, “Yes,” if he would only leave me then.

“Twice on his way to the window he stopped and hesitated;

and while he went down the garden, I saw him clasp his hands as if praying.

‘I longed to fling a book after him ; but I was wrong, Heather, I was wrong. I believe him to have been a good man, though he did come and take all the sunshine out of my life in a minute, for it was such sunshine, and I was so happy.

‘When he left me, then, for the first time, I realized my position. I will not tell you, Heather, what I passed through during the hours that followed. There was a time when I knew, if such a temptation had been presented to me, I should have yielded to it ; but I thought of you, and that thought made me strong. I seemed to hear your voice calling me away. I fancied I could see your eyes pleading—pleading for me to leave ; you saved me, Heather. I should have stayed on, had I never known you ; I should have stayed on or drowned myself—the temptation swayed now to sin, now to suicide, and when I left his house, I do not think I knew exactly whether it was to be life or death,—whether I would end the struggle or endure it. I believe I was mad.’

‘And how long is it since all this happened?’ Mrs Dudley inquired.

‘Months and months ago,’ was the reply. ‘How far I walked that night, all through the darkness, I should be afraid to say ; for how many days and nights I wandered purposelessly on, I could not tell you : my mind took no account of time or distance. It was in the autumn, and the weather lovely. I kept to the field-paths and the lonely lanes ; I avoided high roads, and railway stations, and towns. I had no object in view except to get a long distance away from him ; and where I should ultimately have walked to, I cannot imagine, had my strength been equal to my will ; but it was not. I dropped down one morning on a piece of greensward under the shelter of some elm-trees (the place reminded me of Berrie Down Lane), and I thought I was dying. I saw a house in the distance, and strove to crawl on towards it, but failed in the attempt. I do not remember anything after that, until I found myself lying in a strange bed in a strange room, with my baby beside me.

‘English Samaritans dwelt in the house I had seen amongst

the trees, and some of them finding me lying dead, as they thought, by the wayside, carried me in. I was ill for months, and during the whole of that time they never asked me who I was, or whence I came. Voluntarily, however, I told them my story, and then they would have had me stay with them always, and teach their children, and give such poor service as I could in exchange for board and lodging.

‘I agreed to do so; but, before I settled down, I felt I must see you once more, and hear how Lally was. So I made my way to the Hollow, where, learning from Ned that she was not expected to live, I travelled straight on to London,—and you know the rest. I will go back to my friends very shortly now. I have written to tell them the reason why I could not return before.’

‘But why not stay in London, Bessie?’ inquired Mrs Dudley.

‘Because I am poor,’ was the reply, ‘and I must now work for myself and my child; because I shall be safe there from any fear of meeting him,—because I have nothing to keep me in London, excepting you; and you, Heather—will let me write to you occasionally, will you not?’

‘That was not the way in which you intended to finish your sentence,’ remarked Heather, with a smile.

‘No,’ Bessie answered, frankly, ‘it was not.’

‘You were going to say you could not come to see me quite safely, because you thought I knew something of the person who has brought you to this, my child.’

‘Don’t, Heather—don’t!’ Bessie pleaded.

‘I am to ask no questions, then? I am not to inquire his name; but there is one thing I may do, love, and that is tell you what his cousin would not, that if it be the individual I suspect, he is one of the most miserable men on earth.’

‘And do you think he really loved me?’

‘How should I be able to tell that?’ Heather answered; ‘and you must talk of love no more in connection with him, Bessie; for love becomes sin, when it is impossible for it to produce other fruits than shame and sorrow.’

After that the two women sat silent for a time,—Bessie holding

Heather's hand. and Heather stroking Bessie's hair gently and thoughtfully.

Little more than twelve months before, Heather had told Alick she did not know much about wickedness herself, and behold, already she was coming dimly to understand, that no human comprehension of life can be perfect, the boundaries of which exclude from sight all evil, all passion, all temptation, all repentance, all despair.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DIFFICULTIES.

THE new year brought with it no increase of business to the Protector Bread and Flour Company.

On the contrary, several pairs of stones were standing idle at Stangate, and night-work was now a thing unheard of. Many men were discharged on account of 'slackness,' and the labour of those that remained resulted rather in the accumulation of stock than in the execution of orders.

Orders to be executed had become, in fact, few and far between.

As for the bakehouse, it happened fortunately, perhaps, that no gentlemen of the press desired to see it in the later days of which I am writing, for it had become like one of those places in Pompeii, where, although the implements and utensils necessary for carrying on a trade still exist, the trade itself is a memory. Six months in London being about equivalent to six hundred years in Pompeii, the once busy courtyard and works now resembled nothing so much as a City of the Dead.

Over the Protector something worse than lava had flowed; and, although there was stock everywhere,—stock, and to spare—wheat in quantity, sacks and sacks of flour, still every one looked gloomy,—every one felt that 'things were going queer.'

Half of the vans were now never pulled out of the sheds ; a large number of the horses—creatures that, as we know, eat their heads off when standing idle in the stable—were sent to Gower's and sold there by public auction ; stripped of their fine liveries, many of the 'Company's servants' were now driving unornamental carts about the City, thankful to earn their guinea a week and supplemental pots of beer, wherever such terms were obtainable ; most of the Company's depôts were closed, and had large bills stuck upon the shutters, signifying 'that these desirable premises were TO LET ;' the rounds were shorter than of old, and the men now stopped to get half-pints of ale anywhere they liked without reprimand or dismissal.

A cloud of general depression had settled down upon the directors, the shareholders, and the employés of the Company ; there was nothing much doing at Stangate, and there was less in Lincoln's Inn Fields. About the former establishment, Mr Robert Crossenham walked disconsolately with his hands in his pockets ; before the fire, in the latter, Arthur Dudley read the *Times* diligently, and smoked the last Havannas he was ever likely to have presented to him free of charge.

In the outer office, the clerks consumed walnuts in quantity, pelted each other with the shells, and looked at their watches, or the clock, half-a-dozen times in the course of an hour.

Business was, in a word, as bad as the weather, and that could not by any possibility have been worse. The sky, as regarded the physical world, was leaden ; the streets, sloppy ; the air, raw ; east winds prevalent ; in the City, things were drooping ; stocks, heavy ; rhubarb, a drug ; indigo, blue ; shares, flat ; corn, falling ; sugars, depressed ; money, dear.

The only branch of commerce, the vigour of which did not seem impaired, was that of advertising. People advertised their wares in despair, thinking, if a smash were to come, they might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb,—as well face Basinghall Street with a creditable list of debts as go through the Court for a few hundreds.

It was sink or swim with a vast number of persons during the earlier months of the year in question, and yet the papers never

were so full of advertisements. The *Times* came out with daily supplements, and the *Telegraph* with its extra sheet; the *Standard* curtailed its usual quantity of letterpress, and the weeklies raised their prices per line, and would not guarantee immediate insertion. Not to be out of the fashion, the Protector Bread Company, Limited, announced each morning in the columns of the daily papers, 'that pure bread was obtainable nowhere excepting at the depôts of the Company;' and every now and then a copy of an analysis from Daniel Smith, Esq., M.B., Ph.D., M.A., F.R.S., &c., Professor of Chemistry in the College of the Home Counties' Hospital, and Medical Officer of Health for Belgravia, was appended, stating that he had found a loaf of the Company's bread to contain so much of so many things, and to be perfectly free from a certain number of other things; that all articles used were of the best quality, and that he considered the process of manufacture employed at the Stangate Works to be highly cleanly and satisfactory.

But all this could not make the bread sell. The tide of fortune had turned, and the waters of success were ebbing away from the goodly ship 'Protector' more rapidly than they had ever flowed in on the commercial shore, where that once promising vessel now lay almost a wreck.

There was not a creature connected with it, however, who would admit that the venture was even in danger; and yet every person's temper became, if Arthur Dudley's report were to be believed, unbearable.

His own temper, never the most pliable, was severely tried; and now, instead of longing for each morning to dawn, in order that the business of the Protector might advance still further towards success, he hated to see day break—hated leaving his breakfast-room and going down-stairs to meet those unpleasantnesses which had become of hourly and momentary occurrence in his life.

Between his principals and the public, in fact, Arthur stood exposed to cross fires. He dreaded seeing a stranger enter the office; he looked forward to board-days with perfect horror.

His old enemy, General Sinclair, C.B., tormented him beyond all powers of expression. He seemed to think, that in Arthur's

nangs lay the power of making the Protector a failure or a success. He frequently declared their secretary was inefficient—his business capabilities below contempt. When once matters began to go a little wrong with the Protector, he commenced laying all the blame at Mr Dudley's door. He affirmed that Lord Kemms' open repudiation of any connection with the Company was owing entirely to the secretary's lack of management; he called at the office, and told Mr Dudley he considered a person, endowed with even the most moderate share of sense—an old friend and neighbour, moreover, of his lordship—might have arranged the affair without permitting it to be brought under the notice of the public; and, in the course of subsequent conversations, he more than once hinted his opinion, that, although the gentleman he had the pleasure of addressing might be a gentleman, he was not much better than a simpleton.

To which innuendo, delicately implied, Arthur, with more spirit than might have been expected, considering the state of his finances, replied, that General Sinclair had ample reason for thinking any person who relinquished his independence for the sake of becoming servant to a dozen masters, must be either foolish or mad.

'For my part,' added the secretary, 'I believe when I was persuaded into having anything to do with the Protector, that I was both; and I can very truthfully say, if I could only get back the money I have lost by this confounded Company, I would cut the whole concern to-morrow. Meantime, sir, if you have any complaint to make of my conduct, I would thank you to bring it under the notice of the board. I am compelled to bear bullying once a week, but I will not endure it oftener.'

Upon this, General Sinclair, boiling over with rage, inquired if he (Mr Dudley) knew to whom he was speaking?

'Yes,' Arthur answered, 'I do; to that one of the directors of the Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited, who took my place on the board when I resigned; and, with all my heart and soul, I wish I had never heard of the Protector, nor advanced a penny-piece for the purpose of bringing it before the public.'

And every word that Arthur said he meant. He was sick and

weary of his thankless office ; of the preparation of unsatisfactory reports ; of conversations with disheartened shareholders ; of entering minutes of depressing proceedings.

Adversity, as has been stated, had not proved beneficial to the tempers of his directors, and stormy meetings were now the rule instead of the exception. Every man looked angrily on his neighbour ; every orator believed the last speaker, and the speakers who had preceded him, wrong—practically and theoretically, root and branch ; every creature had his own pet plan for restoring public confidence in the Company, and was wont to return home full of dismal forebodings, of doleful prophecies.

Mr Black alone, perhaps, preserved his equanimity, and assured his colleagues, that, if they would only have patience, the tide must turn. For his part, he said, he had seen so many ebbs and flows, that he did not care a snap of the fingers for any temporary depression. People had not ceased to eat bread ; and, although they might for a time have changed their baker, still the best article must secure custom in the long run. He vehemently protested against the closing of shops, and the reduction of vans. ‘ Better to have given the bread to the nearest charity,’ he said, ‘ than to have adopted such a course. Penny wise and pound foolish, he declared the policy adopted had been. He had advised putting on steam, instead of reducing the pressure, and reminded his fellow-directors of the fact ; but, of course,’ he added, ‘ they knew best, their experience, no doubt, was greater than his ; there was no knowing, indeed, what the best plan to pursue might be, till they found out which plan led to fortune or failure. For his part, however, he thought it was always judicious in business, as at whist, when doubtful to play a trump. He would have played a trump, and if the game were to prove a losing one, he would, at all events, have lost with *éclat* ; but, as he said before, he deferred to the superior wisdom of his colleagues, and only trusted their wisdom might in the long-run prove profitable to all parties interested.’

But the united wisdom of the directors of the Protector did not prove profitable, and every board-day more temper was exhibited, till at length the papers began to take the matter up, and the very

journals who had written leaders concerning the philanthropic and admirable construction of the Company, now found spare corners which they filled up with paragraphs, headed, 'The Protector Bread Company again ;' or with letters from indignant shareholders, who could not understand the gross mismanagement which must exist somewhere in a company, the directors of which declared a dividend of fifteen per cent. per annum at the first half-yearly meeting, and found their profits during the second six months only enabled them to pay with difficulty two and a half per cent. ! Truth was, as Mr Black—who practically knew a vast deal more about the mind of the British public than the rest of the directors were likely ever to evolve out of their internal consciousness—declared, the very honesty of the board swamped the Company, or at least, hastened its extinction. No subterfuges ; no cooking of accounts ; no hints to the secretary, that at the moderate expense of a bottle of good ink, a few quires of paper, and a hundred of pens, things might be made to look as pleasant as any body of shareholders need desire to see them ! It was all as though a doctor, being called in to see a bad case, were to lay the peril of his position before the patient—to exhibit to him, in its appalling nakedness, the poor chance he had of recovery.

'Enough to kill the man at once !' remarked the promoter to Mr Robert Crossenham ; and enough to kill a company, if it had as many lives as a cat. What the devil do we want with directors or any board ? If they would only find the money, I swear I'd find the brains. It is such a mistake having so many masters. Well, if the "Protector" goes smash, I shall always say, one of the finest pots of broth ever a man brought to boiling-point was spoiled by too many cooks having a hand in dishing it.'

As for Mr Stewart, he even had his fits of irritability—his hours when he came to Lincoln's Inn Fields, and treated Arthur to his opinions.

He said, he felt perfectly confident there was something radically wrong about the Company, and he seemed to imagine Arthur could help him to discover where the wrong existed, if the secretary would only set his brains to work.

Some short time after Lally's death he remarked, a little apologetically it is true,—

'I wish to Heaven, Dudley, you would bestir yourself! Surely, it is as much your interest as mine to find out what game Black is playing—for that he is playing some game, I am satisfied.'

'If he be, I am ignorant of it,' Arthur answered. 'I presume you do not suspect me of playing into his hands?'

'No, Mr Dudley, I do not,' the director answered; and from that day Mr Stewart came seldom to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Whatever suspicions he might entertain concerning Mr Black's immaculate honesty, he did not again take Arthur into his confidence, but left the secretary in undisturbed enjoyment of his office, where he had at least the variety of seeing the ship containing his fortunes sink a little lower week by week.

But trade was bad with every one—so Mr Black declared—so even Mr Raidsford stated on one occasion, when he and Arthur, meeting in Lombard Street, the pair commenced singing a mutual Jeremiad over the state of things in the City.

'There is a general distrust,' remarked the contractor, 'for which I am quite at a loss to account, and a pressure for money, even upon good houses, which is unprecedented, at all events, in my experience. No doubt, as the spring advances, business will improve, and I most sincerely hope your shares may then feel the effect of greater commercial confidence.'

All of which was said in the City oracle style, which, unwittingly, perhaps, Mr Raidsford had contracted, and which impressed country people with the idea that he was a power in the state—a man who had risen quite as much by talent as by industry; and yet, spite of his mode of settling everything which was to occur in the future, Mr Raidsford was more humble on that occasion than Arthur had ever before seen him.

He had less of the 'I am the people, and wisdom shall die with me' manner, which had often angered the Squire in days gone by, than formerly; indeed, if such an expression be not out of place in speaking of so great a man, his tone was almost humble; and while he sympathized heartily with Arthur's anxiety, he forbore

reading him a lecture on the instability of all human companies, and did not, even from the heights of his own superior position, look down and say,—‘I told you how it would be. I, of course, who always see what is going to occur, told you;—don’t blame me.’

No, instead of this, he remarked, ‘it was a wonder the “Protector” did not succeed, since the Company’s bread was so good, and people must eat, you know.’ He added, ‘Certainly, however, a company, like an individual, adopting, and strictly adhering to, the system of ready cash, must be prepared to stand a considerable amount of knocking about at first; but I do hope things will brighten with you after a little—I really do;’ having finished which speech, Mr Raidsford went his way, and Arthur proceeded on his, thinking he liked the contractor better during that interview than he had ever done before, and regretting to see his former neighbour looking so thin, and anxious, and careworn.

Which facts, when, in due time, Arthur communicated them to Mr Black, produced a careless comment, to the effect, ‘that very probably his Majesty had cause for uneasiness; people do say things are going deucedly queer up there; but there is no use talking,’ added Mr Black, ‘things are queer with everybody. I never was so hard up in my life; discount is a thing past paying for. If you take a bill to the bank now, with, say even my Lord Mayor’s name on it, the manager looks at you as if you were no better than a thief. It is no good being down-hearted, though; if care killed the cat, I still see no reason why care should kill us. We shall find the “Protector” looking up yet, never fear, and the shares at a premium again. Deuce a share is at a premium in the City, I think, at this present minute of speaking. Where the money gets to, every now and then, passes my understanding. The parsons talk about riches taking unto themselves legs or wings, and fleeing away, or something of that kind, don’t they? If their reverences were in my office for a month, they would find out there is more truth in the statement than most of them actually believe. Fly! by Jove! that’s no word to express the pace they go at. Electricity is a fool to it;’ and so Mr Black rattled on, till Arthur, utterly overwhelmed, bade him ‘Good-day,’ feeling

much too dispirited to put the question he had intended about those bills which would soon be falling due once again.

For things had come to such a pass, that Squire Dudley was compelled to cut down his expenditure by every possible means. Even at Berrie Down he never more scrupulously looked at a sovereign before changing it than now, when it occurred to him not merely as a possibility, but as a probability, that there might be a terrible reverse to the speculative picture to which, while the Protector was still a myth of the promoter's fancy, Mr Black had acted as travelling showman.

No more visions of wealth and position for Arthur—no more dreams of standing for the county, of re-establishing the Dudleys as great people—of keeping up a certain state at Berrie Down—of ease, and comfort, and competence.

His ideas in many respects were much changed since he came to London ; and had it only been possible for him to see a way of ridding the Hollow of all the encumbrances he had thrust upon it, the secretary would have been a happy man.

Like the prodigal, he had gathered all together, and travelled into a far country—a strange country, where he met with those who helped him to waste his substance and devour his living.

And now, behold, the days of famine were at hand, when no man would give unto him ; when he fell into even a worse plight than the poor sinner who would fain have satisfied his hunger with the husks the swine did eat ; for the prodigal had a home to which he could return, while Arthur had none.

Longingly, sickeningly almost, his thoughts turned back to Berrie Down as he walked through the streets of the accursed City (so he styled London), where he had come to seek his fortune.

If the past could only be restored to him, he moaned in spirit, how differently he would act ! If he only could have foreseen his present strait—if he only could have imagined such a termination to his hopes !

If—if—if ! So the impotent, feebly-repentant strain ran on ; if—if—if—although the measure of his misery was as yet nothing like full.

Berrie Down was still mortgaged for only half its value. He had his house in Lincoln's Inn Fields—his regularly paid salary—his shares, which might yet bring him in some return.

He was not involved past hope of extrication. Before his bills fell due again, Mr Black would more than probably be able to meet them. The future did not lie shrouded in total darkness before him ; but as he had been unreasonably sanguine, so he was now unreasonably depressed. He knew more about business, too, than had formerly been the case ; he understood better that there were risks in it as well as certainties—blanks as well as prizes, and he could not blind himself to the truth that Fortune had not hitherto favoured him with so many smiles, as to justify his imagining she would never dishearten him with her frowns.

Besides all this, he was for the first time since his marriage wretched in his home. He could not bear to see his wife's sorrow—a sorrow in which she gave him no chance of sharing.

The changed, worn face—the eyes heavy with weeping, the weary, unelastic step—the silent grief which found no relief in words—were so many tacit reproaches for the cold selfishness which had kept them apart through the course of the years gone by.

Vaguely it began to dawn upon his understanding that nothing earthly can live for ever—that there is no plant so strong but the keenness of a prolonged frost may kill it ; that if men do not enjoy and prize a blessing while it is blooming beside them, the day will surely come when they shall sigh for its fragrance and its beauty all in vain.

He had neglected his wife's love in the years when that bright stream flowed through the fields of his existence, nourishing and making green as it poured its treasures on his unthankful heart ; and now the fountain gushed no longer ; the spring was dried up, the waters made no gladness in the land. Where there had been life, there was lifelessness ; where there had been devotion, there was indifference ; where there had been championship, there was resentment,—and Arthur did not know how to put the wrong right. He had not strength sufficient in his character to set about winning Heather for the second time—wooing the woman as he had wooed the girl.

She had no idea her husband was in such trouble ; she was ignorant of his fears as she had been of his hopes. No one told her Berrie Down was mortgaged—that it must be let, in order to pay the interest—that the Protector was tottering—that trade was wretched, that money was almost an extinct currency.

Mr Black was the only person, indeed, she ever heard mention financial matters at all, and the words he spoke conveyed very little meaning to her understanding.

‘Money,’ said that gentleman to Arthur one day when she chanced to be present—‘money, what is it like? Can you remember ever having seen the article? The first five-pound note which comes my way I intend to frame and keep by me, lest I should never behold another. Some people must be laying up for themselves a lot of treasures ; but who they can be puzzles my brain. According to his own account, not a soul I meet has sixpence in his pocket to keep the devil out of it. Do you happen to know any one, Mrs Dudley, who has money, for I do not? As for me, I am thinking of applying for out-door relief—sending Mrs B. up to the workhouse for a couple of loaves. We are coming to it, fast as we can run.’

‘Some people have money, I suppose,’ answered Heather, remembering at that very moment she had a good round sum locked up in one of her drawers—which sum proved a perpetual plague to her—a plague and yet a comfort.

It was not her own, it was trust-money ; and how the amount chanced to come into her hands Heather never told to any one for many a day afterwards—for many and many a long day. And yet there was no particular mystery about the matter. Heather had the money from Mr Douglas Croft, and it was given to her in this fashion :—

After due time, he came to condole with her on the death of Lally, and then his visits were repeated and repeated until Heather, who could not avoid guessing the nature of the feeling which drew him towards any of Bessie’s kith or kin, began to grow uncomfortable—to imagine she ought to cut short the intimacy somehow, though it was beyond her imagination to conceive how she ought, under the circumstances, to do so.

Perhaps her manner showed her difficulty ; perhaps Mr Croft fancied truly, as the days went by, there was less cordiality in her smile, in the touch of her hand, in the tone of her voice ! Anyhow, be that as it will, he took courage one day, and made his confession.

He attempted no apology ; he did not strive to whiten the blackness of his sin to her. He did not even speak the name of the woman he had wronged. He merely said, 'Some day she may come to you ; some day she may want money. Let me leave a sufficient sum in your hands to keep her—if she be living—from absolute poverty. Be to me my good angel ! do not believe my repentance insincere because I cannot talk much about it. You are my last hope. If it be impossible for me to reach her through you, then indeed my case is desperate.'

Naked he laid his sin out before her—naked as the new-born child, and yet he prayed her not to look askance upon it, but to pity and forgive. Well he understood—this man to whom the world and its ways were roads he knew from beginning to end, from the first chapter to the last—that to the woman whom he addressed the book of sin was almost as a dead letter, as a language unlearned, as a science incomprehensible.

Passion died out in her presence, vice found no defence sustainable when pleaded before that calm, impartial judge. She could not go with him in his agony of love, of struggling virtue, of wicked strategy, of unavailing repentance—she, whose life had never known the rush and tumult of an overpowering affection, who had never been adored, idolized, wronged, by any man, as it was in Douglas Croft's nature to adore, idolize, and wrong,—she, who was pure in thought and deed, pure almost as one of God's angels—how could he tell her of the over-mastering love which had overleapt all boundaries of prudence, all restraints of society, all divine laws, all human restrictions ?

But he could appeal to her pity, and to her generosity. He could lay his future at her feet, and pray her to do with it as she would ; to give him Bessie's address, if it came to her knowledge, or to withhold it ; to mention his name to Bessie, or to preserve

silence concerning him ; to say, if Bessie ever wrote or came near, or to ignore her existence, as she pleased—as she deemed best.

‘I make no conditions, I ask no mercy, Mrs Dudley,’ he said. ‘I place myself in your hands ; and I merely entreat that you will do whatever seems to you best, regardless of my feelings. If I could only know she is living!’ he added.

‘She is living,’ Heather interrupted.

‘Then you have seen her!’ he said eagerly ; ‘is she in London?’

‘You must not question me,’ Mrs Dudley replied. ‘All I can tell you is—that—the girl, whose future you have made so wretched, is living. The greatest kindness you can do her now is to forget that such a person ever existed. I will keep this money, if you wish, in case she should ever really be in want of it. At present, I know, she would not take sixpence from you, and I cannot wonder at her feeling as she does towards you.’

‘Then you have seen her?’ he inquired.

‘Yes, and talked with her ; and guessed who stole her from us—stole her away to shame, and grief, and suffering—’

At that point he interrupted her vehemently. ‘Why should she be ashamed,’ he asked, ‘for that which was no fault of hers ? and was she not better, as she lived with me, believing herself to be a wife, than legally married to Harcourt—a man for whom she never cared two straws ? Is not anything, any sin, any disgrace, any suffering, preferable to a loveless marriage ? Answer me, truly, Mrs Dudley,’ he persisted ; ‘do you not believe it is?’

With her cheeks on fire, Heather rose and answered him—‘Why do you put such a question to me, Mr Croft—to me, of all women living?’ and then she covered her face, and wept aloud—wept for the life she could never live over again, and which had been so poor a counterfeit of existence that she might almost—but for her early training, but for the conviction, that it is better to ‘suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season’—have wished to change places with Bessie, in order to experience the sensation of being loved wildly and passionately, even though it were sinfully, and so round off the incompleted

paragraph of her life, have the sad seventh resolved into the legitimate chord.

Heaven help her ! she felt very weak and very miserable, surrounded by people whose stories seemed all more perfect than her own ; and Douglas Croft, beholding that unexpected outburst, felt in his soul there were more ways of deceiving a woman than by a sham marriage ; more means of breaking a loving heart than by deceit, and falsehood, and wrong.

‘ God pardon me,’ he thought, as he walked slowly home ; ‘ but yet, have I been worse than Dudley ? Is it more sinful to love and betray a woman, than to marry her without love ? ’ and, as is usual with all such questions, he decided the matter in his own favour—never reflecting that two wrongs cannot make a right, that a volume of platitudes will never patch up a woman’s reputation, nor enable her to go back again through the years, and begin her life anew.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE BUBBLE BURSTS.

ALL this time the affairs of the Protector were falling into a more hopeless state of confusion than ever.

No talk now of shares going up to a premium. If a man had offered a handful of them to a beggar in the street, they would scarcely have been accepted, excepting for pipe-lights. On the Stock Exchange, every person knew better than to touch them. The Company was given over by commercial doctors, and no one felt inclined to waste a guinea on propping it up. If trade would only take ‘ a start,’ the directors remarked ; but then, unhappily, trade did nothing of the kind.

Within eighteen months of the promising child’s birth, one of the very objects for which Limited Companies are ostensibly established, namely, to provide such a capital as shall enable a

certain number of traders to live through bad seasons, in the hope of better days coming—this object, I say, was utterly ignored.

To extend their business, the directors would not have hesitated to make a further call upon the shareholders; but to carry their business through a time of extreme commercial distress, they refused to do anything of the kind. To have made a further voyage, Mr Black told them, they would have crowded on all sail; but at sight of the first storm their seamanship proved useless, their courage failed them.

All in vain he and Mr Stewart—united at last—moved and seconded various courageous resolutions; the other directors were cowardly, and refused to acquiesce. Mr Black was twitted with the ill success of many of his bantlings; Mr Stewart was reminded of the fact that his nephew had been the first to leave the ship.

‘The very fust shares,’ remarked Mr Smithers, the great miller at Plaistow, worth Heaven only knew how much money, and likely, before he died, to be worth a few hundreds of thousands more—‘the very fust shares as was sold out of this here Company below their aktual market value was the property of your nephew, Mr Stewart—your own nephew, Mr Aymescourt Croft.’

‘Am I answerable for the misdeeds of my nephew?’ Mr Stewart inquired; whereupon Mr Smithers declared he did not know; that, perhaps, Mr Croft had very good reasons for acting as he did, and that it might have been better for all parties concerned if ‘everybody had sold their shares’ when Lord Kemms repudiated the Protector. Let the argument commence where it would, it always ended in Lord Kemms—it always reverted to the fact that Mr Black had used his name without authority, and that Mr Stewart’s noble relative had been the first to damage the Company, as his nephew was the first to dispose of his shares.

The business men on the Direction attributed all the disasters of the Protector to having so many ‘nobs’ on the Board; while the Sirs, and Generals, and gentlemen possessed of landed property conceived it was the City element which had militated against the success of their enterprise.

One singular fact in connection with this subject may here be noted, namely, that the men who had not paid for their shares at

all, such, for example, as Mr Smithers, General Sinclair, &c., where much more vehement concerning their disappointment than those who really held a large pecuniary stake in the Protector.

It is more difficult, perhaps, to bear with equanimity the loss of hope than the loss of money, and individuals who, like Arthur Dudley, had expected to realize fortunes out of nothing, were much more disheartened by the prospect of failure than persons who, having 'paid their shilling, took their risk.'

This remark applies only, however, to the directors. The shareholders having, one and all, hoped to realize their ten or twenty, or fifty or a hundred per cent., were as virtuously indignant as those members of the Board who had sold their names for scrip. Speculators all—gamblers as much as the man who stakes his last guinea on a throw of the dice—they were yet neither to hold nor to bind when the speculation turned out ill, when the throw of the dice threatened to leave them minus the money they had invested!

Truth is, shareholders have so long been commiserated instead of blamed, so long represented as victims instead of wilful dupes, that when the crash does come, they are for ever airing their grievances, and wearying the public with records of folly that have now grown sickening by reason of constant repetition.

Any man who, in these days, chooses to invest his savings in business, whether on his own sole risk or in company with other adventurers, has no right to ask for pity if the project fail—if the boat sink. Ostensibly, he took his chance; if the result be unfavourable to his hopes, he has no right to claim either sympathy or help.

It is the greed of gain, the dislike of legitimate work, the desire for usurious interest, the weak senseless refusal to be guided by the experience of others, which bring misery to families as to individuals. If men are willing to listen to every pleasant tale, to believe any lie which is put on paper, to think that fortune will make an exception in their favour, cause the sun to stand still, and suspend all the ordinary laws of commerce for their benefit, they must take the consequences.

No legislation can protect fools against the results of their own folly; no government is bound to find brains for the govern-

Shall we pity a man who is deceived by a thimblerrigger, or fleeced by his chatty travelling acquaintance who, on the long northern journey, produces a pack of cards, and proposes a game, merely to while away the time ! And, in like manner, shall we, at this age of the world, pity those 'clergymen and others,' without whose post-office orders and almost illegibly-signed cheques promoters and Limited Liability Companies would soon have to die a death of sheer inanition, and leave the commercial field open for honest labour—for legitimate competition.

When a tradesman exposes his flannels, and cotton prints, and stout calicos on the pavement, a magistrate is reluctant to convict even the practised thief who walks off with a convenient dress-length secreted under her shawl ; and, in like manner, when at this time of the world, in spite of newspaper exposures, notwithstanding warning 'leaders' and magazine articles, and the advice of those whose advice is really worth following, people will risk their money in speculative ventures, shall we be sorry for them ? shall we, like Mr Raidsford, sing a doleful lamentation over the mites of widows and the tithes of clergymen ; over the savings of governesses and the rents of country gentlemen ; nay, rather shall we not say, with Mr Stewart, the mouse is the cat's legitimate prey, let promoters devour that substance which is theirs by right.

There is an old saying, that a man is justified in doing what he likes with his own ; and, if a dupe be the personal property of a rogue, why should the rogue not fleece him, even though such a proceeding be disagreeable to the dupe ?

In business, the millionaire and the curate alike must take his chance, only the curate is never willing to do so ; he never bears his pain in such dignified silence as was the case with Compton Raidsford, who, week after week, found that 'pressure for money,' of which he had spoken to Arthur Dudley, increase so much, that eventually he began to tremble for Moorlands—to believe that the business he had worked so hard to establish was tottering, and that, before long, he should have to place his books in the hands of Messrs Byrne, Browne, Byrne, and Company, accountants, Old Jewry.

He could not understand it. Never in all his experience before

had money been so difficult to get in—so necessary to pay. Houses that formerly would have trusted him to any amount now absolutely refused to draw upon him at four months. Cash with order was requested in some cases; and although, at first, Mr Raidsford had treated such refusals and demands as mere signs of the times, he came before very long to the conclusion that somehow his credit had got damaged—that there was more than accident in the pecuniary pressure which ultimately threatened to crush him to the earth.

In his distress he had no other confidant than Lord Kemms—to no business man dare he have confided his difficulties.

‘I am perfectly solvent,’ he repeated over and over again. ‘My estate ought to pay 60s. in the pound any day; and yet now, if you believe me, my Lord, I find a difficulty in getting even a bill discounted. If I could only trace the origin of this universal distrust, I really should not despair; but as it is, I feel I am fighting in the dark. That there is something being urged against me I am satisfied, but what that something may be I cannot conjecture. I have not speculated; I have not taken any unprofitable contracts. I have sedulously steered clear of railways for the last two years. Even that branch which is proposed from South Kemms to Palinsbridge, I have refused to touch. I wonder if I can have been too cautious—if my prudence has been misconstrued!’

Lord Kemms did not know, but professed himself willing to lend Mr Raidsford whatever amount of money he might at the moment have at his bankers, which offer the contractor declined.

‘I do not think, my Lord,’ he said, ‘you know exactly into what sums our transactions run. No amount of money almost could compensate me for the loss of credit. If things go on for another month as they have done for the last three, I shall have to call a meeting. There is no use blinding oneself in a case of this kind.’

No use, indeed, when one-half the City was already talking of Mr Raidsford’s suspension as imminent—when he was spoken of on ‘Change as shaky, and words of wisdom were uttered in dingy back offices concerning the fall of the great contractor.

It was while things were in this state, both with the Protector,

Limited, and Compton Raidsford, Unlimited, that one night, by the last post, Arthur Dudley received a letter, which at the first glance utterly astounded him. It was directed in Mr Black's hand to Arthur Dudley, Esquire; but the enclosure, in feigned writing, was addressed to Messrs Shields and Montgomery, Solar Foundry, Wolverhampton.

Arthur had mastered the contents of this communication before he comprehended it could not be intended for him. He ran his eye over the few lines it contained hastily, and then examined the envelope; after that he read the letter again, and then, placing letter and envelope together, compared both at his leisure.

'What a d—— shame!' he at length broke out; and he rose straight away, and taking his hat walked forth into the night. He had the letter in his pocket-book, and he strode on like a man who distrusted the strength of his own resolution if he stood still and deliberated about the thing he was resolved to do.

Along Great Queen Street and Long Acre he proceeded rapidly. Taking the most direct routes he soon reached Regent Street, which he crossed; thence making his way to Bond Street, he commenced threading through the maze of squares that lie in that part of London till he came to the 'Place' in which Mr Raidsford's town house was situated.

He had chosen a most unseasonable hour at which to pay a visit; but Arthur knew that if Mr Raidsford were at home he should gain admittance. Lights flamed out across the pavement; the house was illuminated as though for a royal marriage; carriages containing merchant princes, their wives and their daughters, were setting down as Mr Dudley drew near the house.

This was not quite what Arthur had anticipated; but still he held to his resolution, and arrived at the door which Lord Kemms was entering at the moment.

'My Lord,' he said; and at the words his former neighbour turned and recognized him.

'You here, Dudley?' he exclaimed. 'This is an unexpected pleasure. Shall we go on? we are stopping the way.'

'I am not a guest,' Arthur answered; 'but I want to see Mr Raidsford particularly. I can wait until he is at leisure, but I

must see him. Will you manage this for me?' he added, entreatingly, feeling, perhaps, that in his walking dress amongst all that gay company he should stand but a poor chance of inducing any servant to carry his message. Good-natured as ever, Lord Kemms readily consented to do what was required.

'No bad news, I trust,' he whispered, as one of the servants was showing Arthur to the library, there to wait Mr Raidsford's appearance.

'Not bad news, I hope,' Arthur answered; 'but, still, news he ought to hear at once.'

'I will tell him,' Lord Kemms said, and closing the library door he left the secretary marvelling whether such an entertainment could be considered a sign of impending ruin—of pecuniary difficulty.

There had been a time when Arthur would have decided this question in the negative; but he was wiser now, and knew that in London people feast on the very brink of commercial death, that they gather their friends and give elegant *déjeuners*, and eat with an appetite and enjoy their repast, even though they know next hour Jack Ketch is coming to arrange the noose and hang them by the neck till all chance of return to respectable West End society is past for ever.

To his country imagination, it was still a fearful and a wonderful thing to see people spending, with poverty stalking gauntly at the heels of pleasure; but he had acquired sufficient knowledge of town to be at the same time aware three or four hundred pounds seem a mere bagatelle to a man whose liabilities amount to hundreds of thousands.

With affairs going all cross in the City, Mrs Raidsford, triumphant in satins and jewellery, was 'at home' in Huntingdon Place.

If another chance were never to offer itself of airing her bad grammar, and exhibiting her wonderful taste in dress to her rich and grand acquaintances, that was all the more reason why she should avail herself of this opportunity, while opportunity lasted. Only stupid, unsophisticated people like the Dudleys thought of retrenchment before the final crash; besides, Mrs Raidsford meant to marry her daughters off, if she could, and all the world knows

the best way to secure a desirable husband is to ask a few hundred people to meet and make themselves as uncomfortable as circumstances and the construction of modern London houses will permit.

All this and much more to the same effect Arthur Dudley had abundant leisure for considering before the door opened and Mr Rainsford entered.

He made some hurried apology for his delay, and then throwing himself into a chair opposite Arthur, anxiously demanded his business.

Amongst his guests in the drawing-rooms, on the staircase, in the hall, he had been a prosperous-looking, smiling gentleman; now he flung the mask off, and allowed the lines of care to appear in his face, a tone of despairing trouble to lurk in his voice.

'Don't be afraid, man,' he said, almost brusquely. 'Lord Kemms told me your business concerned me; out with it; I am not a child—I can face the worst—I have seen it coming this many a day.'

'Mr Rainsford,' began Arthur, 'what you have suffered from has been a loss of credit, I understand; a pressure, as you yourself told me, for money.'

'Yes,' was the reply; 'and when this pressure commenced, I believed my credit to be as good as that of any man in England; I believed it to be so good, in fact, that I paid no attention to the pressure for a considerable period—not, in fact, until it became almost like a run on a bank.'

'And to what cause did you attribute that run?' inquired Arthur.

'I have never been able to attribute it to any cause,' was the reply; 'I had no heavy losses; I was engaged in no great ventures; I was perfectly solvent; I am solvent, in fact, now; but still I know I must stop; I have fought as long as fighting seems of any use; now I must adopt another plan.'

'If you were aware of the cause of your loss of credit, would it help you to battle through?' asked Arthur.

'That would depend entirely on the cause,' was the reply.

'Supposing it were private malice,' Arthur suggested; 'suppose an enemy to have been at work.'

'I have not an enemy in the world,' Mr Raidsford answered.

'If you read that, perhaps you will alter your opinion,' Arthur remarked, handing him the letter he had received. 'Mr Raidsford, I could not rest till I had come to you ; I feared my own purpose might undergo a change before morning. I knew it was right you should be told this thing, and yet I hesitated about showing a letter which strictly is none of my property. I shall speak to Black about what I have done ; you know now who has been your enemy, and I trust it may not be too late for you to repair the mischief he has caused.'

And with that Arthur left the room, and wended his way back to Lincoln's Inn Fields. He had never liked Mr Raidsford, and he could not be very cordial to him, even at the moment when he was stretching out his hand to save the contractor from ruin.

He had not done him this service out of good-will, but because right was right, and justice, justice. He had hasted to serve this man, whom he always regarded with jealousy and distrust ; but it was not in Arthur's nature to feel other than bitterly the fact, that while he was able to serve Mr Raidsford he was unable to extricate himself ; that though Moorlands might be preserved, still Berrie Down was heavily mortgaged.

The very step he had taken, moreover, would, he knew, make his own position more difficult. With Mr Black for an enemy, what troubles might he not expect to have to face in the future—what about his bills, what about Berrie Down, what about his means of actual subsistence ? If a man could, secretly and anonymously, damage another's credit, plot and scheme to beggar a person against whom he had a grudge, watch the growth of his plans through months, and never flinch nor falter in the execution of his purpose, what might Arthur not expect at his hands, after having baulked him in his design ?

All that night Squire Dudley lay awake, thinking in what words he should tell Mr Black he had found him out, exposed his scheme, and defeated his carefully-prepared plot.

He knew exactly how the accident, which put him in possession of Mr Black's secret, had occurred ; and he was well aware, in due time, the letter intended for him would be returned by

Messrs Shields and Montgomery to Dowgate Hill ; but he resolved not to wait for that *dénouement*—instead of doing so, he started next morning, directly after breakfast, for the City, where Mr Black received him with his usual easy flow of language.

‘ Well, and how is the “ Protector ? ” ’ was his greeting ; ‘ anything new ? I think things were a shade better on the market yesterday, and I have some applications this morning from parsons about shares in the “ Universal.” Discount is down a half, too. By-the-by, you got my letter, I suppose ? There is no help for it, Dudley, we must renew those confounded bills again. You noticed what I said about knowing a fellow willing to do them ? ’

‘ I did not,’ answered Arthur, ‘ for the simple reason that I suppose the letter you meant to send to me is now at Wolverhampton.’

‘ What the devil do you mean ? ’

There was no sham about Mr Black’s tone or manner as he put this question. For the first time, perhaps, during all the years he had known him, Arthur beheld the actual man, and the actual man was not pleasant to behold.

‘ Messrs Shields and Montgomery’s letter came in my envelope,’ the secretary explained.

‘ Indeed ! And what have you done with that letter ? ’

‘ I took it last night to Mr Raidsford.’

For a moment Arthur thought his kinsman was going to strike him. Mr Black made a step forward towards his visitor, and lifted his clenched hand, but next instant he let it drop heavily on the table while he asked—

‘ Pray, Mister Squire Dudley, was that your idea of honour ? ’

‘ Yes, Mr Black, it was, strictly,’ Arthur replied.

‘ And how much did he give you for the information ?—come now, be frank. I would have outbid him, had you played your cards well. What was the figure ? Did you go cheap ? I’ll be sworn you did. I’ll bet ten to one you sold yourself as well as me. Oh ! you won’t answer—you are sulky. You are going to deprive me of the pleasure of your honourable, and gentlemanly, and intellectual society ! Curse you ! ’ added the promoter, suddenly changing his sneering tone for one of the intensest fury, ‘ curse

you, for a skulking, sneaking, timid fool, who has not even sense enough to enjoy seeing a man who ruined us ruined likewise ! I'll be even with you yet. I'll make you rue the day you meddled in my concerns and spoiled my game. Do you hear me, Dudley ?' he shouted across the outer office ; 'look to yourself !'

'I intend,' was Arthur Dudley's reply, as he walked into the street, knowing he was a ruined man.

He did not return to Lincoln's Inn Fields for some hours—not, in fact, until after he had seen a solicitor, and laid the exact state of his affairs before that gentleman.

Now the worst had come, he felt equal to face it. He felt it was better to know the extent of his liabilities, and to take immediate measures for breaking off all dealings with the man who had led him so terribly astray.

For every scrap of paper to which he had ever attached his name, he was liable. His shares, he knew, were not worth sixpence ; the whole of his property would barely suffice to pay his debts ; Berrie Down must go, and also the house in Lincoln's Inn Fields. This was the end of the dreamer's vision—this was the fortune he had come to London to seek ! Beggary !

His salary depended on the life of the 'Protector,' and that was scarcely expected to survive from day to day. Heather would have to be told now—Heather, whose love he had grown to value too late—Heather, whom he had thrust from him that night when she knelt beside his chair, pleading to be unto him an helpmeet ! Would she reproach him—would she ask if he had married her to bring her to this ? No !—he knew she never could be so unlike the sweet Heather of old as to taunt him with his misfortunes ; but would she be cold ; would she be hard and unsympathetic ; would she merely bear and leave him to bear also ? If he only could have been sure of her, Arthur, walking about the lanes and alleys of the City, thought he should not have cared so much !

He had despised the crutch in his days of strength and independence ; and now, when he was lame, he stretched forth his hand to touch some support in vain.

When late in the afternoon he reached Lincoln's Inn, he found Mr Stewart, Mr Harcourt, and two strangers in the office.

At a glance he knew something disagreeable had happened, and, before five minutes were over, he was informed the cashier, recommended by Mr Stewart himself, had been embezzling the moneys of the Company ; that he, Mr Black and Mr Robert Crossenham, and Mr Bayley Crossenham, the latter trading under the firm of 'Stack and Son, Corn Factors, Mark Lane,' had all been playing into each other's hands, buying wheat which never was delivered, charging it to the 'Protector,' and dividing the proceeds thus obtained.

'We want to look at the register, if you please, Mr Dudley,' said Mr Stewart, with a terrible politeness.

'There,' he remarked, turning to Mr Harcourt, when Arthur had produced the book required, 'it is as I thought ; and now we shall not have even the poor satisfaction of transporting him. Mr Dudley, I should have thought that *even you* might have concluded there was something wrong when a clerk bought shares in a sinking concern ;' and, with this remark, which was so much Hebrew to Arthur, Mr Stewart said, 'good evening,' and went off with the strangers he had brought with him.

'What is it all about?' Arthur asked of Mr Harcourt, when they were left alone.

'There has been wholesale robbery,' was the reply, 'and the Company will have to be wound up.'

'And why can they not prosecute Graham?'

'Because, being a shareholder, he is a partner, and a man cannot legally embezzle his own property. It is a bad business, a very bad business !' added Mr Harcourt. 'I am afraid Mr Black is a thorough-paced scoundrel.'

'I know he is,' said Arthur ; but the fact of his knowledge did not make matters any the better for him or for the Protector.

After the clerks were gone, and Mr Harcourt had departed, Arthur still sate alone in his office, looking his misery in the face. Twice Tifford had been good enough to inform the secretary that dinner was ready, but Arthur took no notice of the summons.

How to go up-stairs and see Heather—how to tell her the game was over, and that it had left him a beggar, he could not imagine. What were his dreamings in the old days, speeding down to

Palinsbridge, and planning to communicate the fact of a thousand a year being added to their income, to this?

Coldness and doubt had not visited Heather; Mrs Croft had not aroused her jealousy; Lally was still with her, and he had not then neglected his child. Poor Lally, poor little Lally! The man's heart must have been very heavy that night, for, sitting in the firelight, the tears dropped down from his eyes, one by one, as he sat thinking of his living wife and his dead child.

If only the past could come back again, how differently he would act! if only Heather would be to him the wife of old, he might still make a struggle and conquer Fortune yet.

Twice that day Arthur had found his level; had seen in what estimation people held his talents; and, in the years gone by, he had estranged from him the woman who believed him perfect—who was unto him, in the old, happy time at Berrie Down, though he recked not then of his blessing, more than silver or gold, Far above Rubies.

While he was thinking, Heather herself opened the door and glided up to where he sat. For weeks previously she had been trying to draw nearer to her husband, seeking for an opportunity to pray for 'forgiveness,' Lord help her, 'for her selfish sorrow;' and now, in the firelight, she came and, laying her hand on his shoulder, said,—

'Is anything the matter, Arthur? Are you ill? are you vexed? I have sent Tifford twice to tell you dinner is ready.'

'I do not want any dinner,' he answered. 'I have had meals enough for one day—meals enough to destroy any man's appetite. The "Protector" is going to be wound up, Heather, and my salary will be stopped, of course.'

She hesitated for a moment before replying, then she said, 'I am very sorry for your sake, dear, for you hoped to make so much out of it. We must return to the Hollow, I suppose.'

'I must sell the Hollow,' he answered; and then, in a few hurried sentences, he told her all—his folly, his credulity, his disappointed hopes, his ruin.

He kept nothing back; and when he had quite finished, when there was nothing more to add to the dreary recital of loss and mis-

fortune, he paused, listening for what she should say, for how she should receive his confession.

For a moment there was silence—a silence so great that the falling of the cinders on to the hearth alone broke the stillness.

‘Will she reproach me,’ he wondered; ‘will she be angry at last? will she say nothing, and refuse pity to me, though she can give it to every other created being?’

‘Have you not a word to speak to me, Heather?’ he asked at last; and then the tears she had been striving to keep back burst forth, and flinging her arms around his neck, she sobbed out,—

‘Oh, my love, my love!’ and as she lay on his breast Arthur understood that he was to her, in that hour of bitter distress, dearer than the lover of her girlhood, than the husband of her youth

CHAPTER XXXV.

FORGOTTEN.

THE ‘Protector’ had been dead for two years. Its very name was a memory. Lawyers who had assisted in holding a legal inquest over its remains—directors who had been badgered to death concerning its failure—people who had lost money or made money by it, recollected that there had once been such a Company; but the grass was growing green above its grave—in law courts and the Stock Exchange. So many similar ventures had lived, and prospered, and died in the time, that its history had become an old, old tale, which was never now repeated save here and there by one who had lost money through it.

Summer was come once again, and in the close streets round about Bethnal Green and Spitalfields the hot sultry air which met any adventurous explorer who bravely pursued his way into those almost unknown regions, seemed like the breath issuing from the mouth of some sulphurous pestilent volcano. The thousand and one smells of the East of London assailed his nostrils, the sight

and sounds of that most wretched locality offended his eyes and ears.

Few people who were not called thither by business or necessity jostled the rightful inhabitants in the streets ; but it is to the east of Bishopsgate-street Without I must, nevertheless, with all due apology for even hinting at the existence of such a neighbourhood, conduct my reader to Silk-street, so named, no doubt, in olden times, on account of the number of silk weavers who abode there.

It had once been a thoroughfare of no small importance ; but its glory had faded, its trade fallen away, although the railway waggons thundered through it, and the noise of passing carts and cabs never stopped, never from morning till night. It was a mean, poor street, composed principally of dilapidated-looking three-storey houses, in the windows of which were exhibited here fruit and vegetables, there drapery goods, and again furniture of the stalest, poorest, commonest description. Towards the end of the thoroughfare, however, there were erected some new ware-houses and stores.

Contrasting gloomily with their bright red-brick fronts was the gateway which gave ingress to Mr Lukin's silk-weaving factory.

A gloomy, disreputable gateway, affording admittance up a narrow cart-road into a wider court-yard beyond, one side of which was occupied by a packing-shed and a carpenter's shop ; another by the weaving-factory, and a third by the dwelling of the manager ; the only picturesque things about the place being the windlass and buckets belonging to a disused well.

We must pass in, if you please, for Arthur Dudley is the manager, and this is his house.

There are high walls all around the court-yard ; high walls blackened with smoke, unrelieved by tree, or ivy, or climbing Virginian creeper.

Heather is planning to cover them with greenery, but her attempts have hitherto proved abortive ; the shrubs all die, like the plants in her ghostly little garden, where she can get nothing but double red daisies and stocks and pinks to grow.

A change this from Berrie Down, you say ! Certainly ; but life is full of changes, and Arthur Dudley has still much to learn.

The world's educational establishments are not always pleasant places at which to reside ; the playgrounds are oftentimes contracted, and the diet not suited to delicate palates ; but the lessons taught in those seminaries of practical learning prove oftentimes much more useful than the pleasant tasks conned beside the singing river, under the rustling trees.

As for Heather, there is no life perfect, yet it may be doubted whether she was very unhappy in those days of pecuniary struggle, of pinching economy. The high walls which seemed to be closing her in were, perhaps, the most active trouble of her life. Sometimes she felt as if she were in a prison, as if she were a thousand miles from every one, as if she should die for want of air, as though, if a fire were to break out, she should never reach the gates alive.

At all of which fancies Arthur laughed, and then Heather laughed ; and then the two, in the summer evenings, would water their tiny bit of garden-ground, and talk about the far-away country, which it almost seemed as though they were never to behold again.

Entirely owing to Arthur's pride. Heather could not blind herself to this fact, although she sedulously refrained from touching upon it.

When Berrie Down was sold, the gentleman who bought it offered Arthur two hundred and fifty pounds a year and a free house, if he would take the management of the farm, but Arthur refused.

There was a situation open for him, he said, of five hundred a year in London, and he would never be servant where he had been master ; so the proprietor took 'no' for an answer, and passing on to Alick, secured his services for one-half the sum and the use of Berrie Down House and farm produce, till such time as the proprietor should require the residence from him. Two of the girls resided with the young steward, but Agnes remained with Heather ; Cuthbert had left the Messrs Elser, and was now re-

ceiving a good salary from Mr Raidsford. Altogether the family prospects were brighter than of old, excepting as regarded Arthur, who had steadily fallen from height to height, till at length he found himself cashier and book-keeper, and yard-keeper and general manager, to Mr Lukin, who had great works in the North, and was reported to be enormously rich.

If he were so, Arthur did not derive much benefit from his wealth, for he had but two hundred a year ; while Simons, the actual though sub-manager, thought himself fortunate to receive two pounds a week.

Certainly Arthur's duties were light—to take money and pay it into the bank—to write a report of how business progressed to his employer—to keep the books, and see to things generally. There was no great hardship or difficulty involved in these and such-like matters ; and yet Arthur was now, as of old at Berrie Down, a wretched man.

He had a trouble dogging his footsteps, and that trouble was debt. After paying off the most of his liabilities, and leaving himself without a sixpence in the world, he was still five hundred pounds deficient, and five hundred pounds to a man who is trying to live respectably on two hundred a year is, with a pressing creditor, almost equivalent to utter bankruptcy.

His friends would have helped him had they known of his grievous strait ; but Arthur's was not a temper to take help or pecuniary assistance from any one on earth. With all his heart, Mr Raidsford desired to show his gratitude to the man who had saved him from ruin ; but when he came to press offers of money, offers of situations, high salaries, and so forth, on Arthur's acceptance, the poor gentleman drew himself up, and made the contractor feel he had made a mistake—that Arthur Dudley of Silk-street very much resembled Arthur Dudley of Berrie Down, only that he was a degree prouder than of old.

Mr Croft, also, more earnestly desired to do something for his friend, but he was repelled haughtily by Arthur, and also, though more gently, by Heather.

As for Mr Black, in answer to the solicitor who, on Arthur's behalf, waited on him concerning those bills for which Squire Dudley

was legally liable, he said plainly he never would find sixpence towards helping Dudley out of the mess into which he had got himself.

'If he had stuck to me, I should have stuck to him,' the promoter answered; 'but he would go fishing on his own hook, and if he have come to grief, he has nobody to blame but himself.'

Mrs Ormson and the Marsdens, of course, ignored the very existence of such people as the Dudleys; and, when they were unhappily mentioned, laid the blame of all Arthur's misfortunes at the door of the 'woman he married.' As for Miss Hope, from foreign parts, she was sympathetic, but necessarily vague. She did not know in the least how low her nephew had fallen, but hoped, she said, on her return to England, to visit them in their little house, which, spite of all Heather told her concerning its limited accommodation, she had no doubt would be charming, 'dear Heather having such a taste in arrangement.'

In brief, from all their old haunts, from all their old acquaintances, from all their pursuits, and thoughts, and ideas, the Dudleys had vanished away.

From the former life they had fallen. As a stone drops into the river's depths, so they had sunk to that wretched East-end street, and in the circles in which they once mixed, they were forgotten as a dead man out of mind.

The old servants, too, were gone; they were unable to afford to keep any save Priscilla, and she after a long illness had come back almost from death to serve her former mistress—never to leave her, she declared to Bessie, who went to see her in the hospital—never to leave her more.

'I always said to Mrs Piggott, Miss Bessie, I hoped I should die before crinoline went out of fashion, and when there was a talk of them going to be left off, I fell sick; but now I hear it was all nonsense, so I mean to get better, if it was only for the sake of Mrs Dudley, who says she misses me, Miss Bessie—misses me!'

As for Bessie, she too, unable to remain away from her old friend, had returned from the country farmhouse, and taken up her abode in a street not very far away from that where Heather lived.

She was a good and tasteful needlewoman, and earned a tolerable livelihood, with her white, pretty fingers.

Many an hour she and Heather spent together while Arthur was busy ; but Arthur was not taken into the secret. Even Heather doubted his discretion in the matter, and there were ample reasons why the girl's whereabouts should be known to as few persons as possible.

Ned and Mrs Piggott were married and settled in a public-house on the road to South Kemms, where, Alick informed Heather, they did a capital business, and kept a most regular and respectable tavern. 'It is quite a little hotel, mother,' said the young man, adding, 'When shall I be able to persuade you to come down to the Hollow, and see how lovely the place looks ?' but, in reply, Heather shook her head.

'Naturally, the very name of Berrie Down is painful to Arthur,' she answered. 'I should like to please you, Alick, but I cannot bear to vex him. His life has been a very hard one, and I ought not to make it any harder.'

Then Alick had another project ; he would take a house at the sea-side for a month, and Heather, and the girls, and Leonard should all go down and stay there, and he, and Arthur, and Cuthbert would spend their Sundays with them. 'It will be like the old times for us all to be together again,' finished the youth ; 'and, dear Heather, I do want to see you looking a little better ;' whereupon she called him a foolish boy, and, drawing his face down to hers, kissed it, saying, 'people could be well and happy anywhere, in London as in the country, if they would only try to be thankful and contented.'

But the 'foolish boy' resolutely refusing to be either contented or thankful, unless she would agree to his plan, at length, when it was far on in the summer, 'between the crops' as he put it, Alick persuaded Heather to make her preparations for leaving home, which she did all the more readily, perhaps, because Arthur agreed to come down on the Saturday nights, and remain with them until the Monday mornings.

'I think the change will do us all good,' he said ; but there was a look in his face which Heather somehow mistrusted, and which

caused her to wonder what could be the matter with Arthur; whether he had any fresh trouble he was keeping from her, or whether he felt ill and would not say so, for fear of spoiling her holiday.

Talking the matter over with Bessie, however, that young person combated her friend's fears successfully. 'If Arthur should be ill,' she said, 'I shall certainly hear of it from Morrison' (Morrison was one of the workmen somewhat devoted to Priscilla, in whom both Heather and Bessie trusted, and it is only fair to add, he deserved such trust, for the notes they mutually exchanged were never chattered about; the name of the young lady, whom Mrs Dudley went to see, was never mentioned to any one); 'and if I do hear of there being anything the matter,' went on Bessie, 'I shall certainly go round to nurse him, and telegraph for you; so make yourself happy concerning that dear husband, and pack up your clothes at once.'

Which advice Heather followed in a divided frame of mind; divided, because while she longed to see the country, she hated leaving Arthur, who, on the very Saturday of her departure, said he should not be able to accompany her out of town that week, because Mr Lukin was coming to London, and might be expected in Silk-street at any moment.

'But you must go, dear,' he added, 'and I will run down through the week, if I possibly can. Come now, get your bonnet on, or we shall be too late at Waterloo;' and thus he hurried her on till they were fairly in a cab, *en route* to the South-western Railway Terminus.

There were Alick and Cuthbert, Lucy and Laura, all looking as bright and sunshiny as the weather.

'Not coming, Arthur!' exclaimed his brother; 'what a shabby trick! I could not have believed you would have served a fellow so!'

'It is not my fault, Alick,' was the reply; 'but Mr Lukin is coming to town, and I must be on the spot to receive him; you will take care of Heather, Alick,' he added, in a lower and a different tone, drawing his brother aside; 'you will promise me to take care of her?'

'Take care of Heather !' answered Alick, ' I like that ; as though I should not take care of her. Do you think I forget, Arthur—do you imagine I could possibly forget, the years during which she was our mother—the best mother ever any boys and girls found ?'

'Thank you, I shall be easier now,' Arthur answered ; and then he joined the others and kept near his wife till it was time for the little party to enter the compartment, which they quite filled. To the last, Squire Dudley never took his eyes off his wife's face ; and, when the moment of final parting came, he kissed her two or three times over, saying, 'God bless you, Heather ! think of me sometimes.'

When the train moved off, he stood on the platform, looking after the carriage which contained his wife ; and as the speed increased, Heather saw a look come over his countenance which filled her with so terrible alarm, that she cried out in a moment, 'Alick, I must go back to Arthur ! there is something the matter ! I ought never to have come !'

All in vain they tried to combat her determination ; at the first station where the express stopped, Heather alighted, resolved to return to town. She would not hear of Alick travelling with her. 'No,' she said ; 'if he be in any trouble, I shall be better to remain alone with him ; if not, I will go down to you by the first train on Monday morning. I promise, Alick, faithfully ! Do not try to prevent my going home,' she pleaded ; 'remember, once before I wanted to turn back, and Arthur would not let me !'

Which last argument proving unanswerable, with heavy hearts they allowed her to have her own way, and she went into the waiting-room, where she stopped for an hour, until the up-express appeared in sight, when she took her seat, together with some other passengers, and was soon tearing back to London, under the glare of the afternoon sun. At the terminus she took a cab for Norton Folgate, from whence she walked on to Silk-street. She had no need to ring the bell, for one of the men coming out at the moment, afforded her entrance, without attracting, in any way, attention to her return.

'I fear I have done a very foolish thing,' she thought, as she stepped inside the gateway, and any one else might have thought

the same, for Arthur had complained of neither ache nor pain ; he had been in good spirits all the morning ; he had faithfully promised to come down through the week ; and, but for that expression of hopeless, helpless, blank despair in his face as the train swept out of the station, Heather would have gone away happy, and Arthur's fate proved different.

As it was, he had traversed the road back from Waterloo a miserable and a wretched man.

He had brought much grief to Heather, he would bring no more. He had been tempted, and he had fallen ; he had been pressed for money, and he had 'borrowed'—that was the way he put it to himself—a few hundreds from Mr Lukin, and he had vainly striven to replace those hundreds, and now Mr Lukin was coming to inspect the books, and a worse thing than poverty—disgrace ! was without in the street, waiting to cross their threshold.

But Heather should never know this ; no man, nor no woman, should ever say a Dudley of Berrie Down had committed a felony. There was one way of escape, and his feeble mind clutched hold of that poor straw eagerly : one way—he would take care of himself, and Alick would take care of Heather !

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE BITTERNESS OF DEATH.

ONCE inside the house, Heather, all in a flutter, ran up to her own room, and asked herself why she had returned. Even now—even with the consciousness on her that she had done a very foolish thing, at which Arthur would be naturally vexed—she felt she could not have gone on ; that the journey, with that awful dread weighing her down, would have been one of pain instead of pleasure ; that it would be far more a holiday to her—far and

away more, to stay behind with her husband—her poor, careworn, miserable husband—than to travel through the loveliest scenery on earth.

She had told Alick it was a feeling, a foolish though uncontrollable feeling, which made her turn back ; but she would have spoken more correctly had she said it was the love of her heart—that love which is stronger than death, more constant than sorrow

Yet she knew she never could make Arthur understand this ; knew she never could hope to impress upon him how miserable she had felt after the farewell at the station ; how utterly impossible it was for her to go on and be happy, while he remained behind alone.

How should she tell him ? With a vague desire to break the fact of her return to others before facing her husband, she went down-stairs again, and into the kitchen, meaning to tell Prissy she feared Mr Dudley would be lonely, and so returned, sending the rest of the family on. She meant to have a comfortable chat with Prissy, for her heart was very full, and she longed to have a good talk with some one ; but, when she entered the kitchen, no Prissy was there ; no Prissy was in the back-kitchen either, nor in the washhouse, nor in the larder, nor in the coal-cellar, for even into that last hiding-place Heather peeped.

Then it suddenly occurred to Mrs Dudley that there was a terrible look of order about the kitchen ; about the pots and pans, the plates and dishes ; everything was in its proper position ; the chairs were ranged against the wall, the table had no crockery heaped upon it, there was not even a glass-cloth flung carelessly aside.

What could it mean ? Heather stood considering this question, and all at once her heart gave a great leap ; not of joy, but fear. There was no fire ; the fact had not struck her at first—perhaps because she was then intent on looking for Prissy—now, however, it came home to her, not merely that there was no fire, but that the wood, paper, and coals were laid ready for lighting ; ready for lighting in both kitchens. A woman must, like Heather, be a

practical housekeeper to understand the full significance of such a spectacle.

Both fires out ; both laid ready for lighting ; that bespoke premeditation.

Now, premeditation meant, not that Prissy had gone up-stairs to dress, and forgotten her fires ; not that Prissy had gone out shopping, and remained to gossip ; not that Prissy had met her lover, who made time pass so pleasantly, that minutes and fuel were alike forgotten ; but that Prissy had gone out with leave to do so granted, and that she had conscientiously waited to put the house into apple-pie order before her departure.

One of Heather's greatest comforts, in leaving home, had been the idea that Prissy would see that her husband wanted for nothing ; that she would be always on guard, always at hand to get him whatever he wanted.

Mrs Dudley had arranged that Prissy's mother was to come up by the late train that night, and keep her company while the family were away ; and the very last words she spoke, before leaving home, were, ' Don't forget, Prissy, to write to me often ; and if Mr Dudley should be ill, I depend upon your sending for me ; ' in answer to which Prissy said, ' I will see to everything, mum, as if you was at home ; and I'll write every two days, and never be out of the house till you come back.'

After that, to return and find the bird flown, was rather disheartening. Mrs Dudley could not unravel the enigma, and she thereupon slowly ascended the stairs, wondering as she went what it all could mean.

She passed her own room, and wending her way up another flight of stairs, entered that belonging to Prissy. There, on the foot of the bed, hung the girl's cotton gown, her apron, and various other articles of apparel which Heather recognized at a glance as her every-day habiliments.

With an awful creeping dread upon her, Heather opened the door of the closet where Prissy hung up her gown, and found, not the girl's best dress, bonnet, and shawl, but empty pegs—a fearful vacancy.

What could it all mean ? She looked again around the apart-

ment, and perceived Prissy's box was gone. Clearly, her trusty domestic had departed, not merely for the afternoon, but for a longer period.

With a sense of suffocation on her, Heather walked to the small window which was partially open, and stood there wondering what she should do next.

The state of the house increased her difficulty as to the best means of explaining her return to Arthur. Supposing he had made any arrangement with which her presence would interfere; supposing it should seem as though she had come back to play the part of a spy, to be a torment instead of a blessing; what could he say, what was there he might not imagine?

That Prissy ever left the house of her own good will, Heather's understanding refused to credit; and why Arthur should have sent her away, Heather likewise could not comprehend.

If she had done anything wrong, and been discharged, she would have taken all her clothes; if she had not done anything wrong, why did Arthur let her go? Over this question Heather, still with her bonnet on, stood puzzling; and, as she stood, she saw the men leave off work and don their coats, and pass out of the yard; at first, in gangs, afterwards in twos and threes—finally, one by one.

There they went—foremen, overlookers, clerks, sub-manager; finally, Arthur went down to the gate, talking to Morrison as they walked.

At the gate Morrison paused and seemed impressing something earnestly on Mr Dudley, to which the latter listened with an appearance of interest. Then Arthur replied; and at length satisfied, as it seemed, Morrison touched his hat and passed through the gate, while Arthur looked after him. As he came up the yard, Heather, from her post of observation, could see his face distinctly; that face which had struck her girlish fancy, but which was now so changed—so changed! oh, God!

As she looked at him, and remembered the first day they had ever set eyes on one another, the tears came welling up, and for a moment she could not see him because of the mist which blinded her.

Poor Arthur ! Poor Arthur ! In the after-days it was a comfort to her to recollect that at that moment there came no thought of selfish pity into her mind for poor Heather. Poor Heather ! changed and broke too.

If he had suffered, had not she ? if he had borne, had not she ? if he had found his cross almost heavier than he could endure, had not hers also bowed her to the very ground ? had not she wept her tears, and fought with her anguish ? Yea, truly ; and yet Heather, looking at that pale, worn, haggard man, who came slowly lounging up the yard, thought of none of these things, but only of the blasted hopes, of the proud, disappointed, broken heart of the husband of her youth.

The sunlight, flaring down into the court-yard, shone full upon his face as he walked back from the entrance gates, swinging the great key on his forefinger ; and Heather, sheltered from observation by the window-curtain, looked down on the man she had returned to comfort, not knowing exactly what to do—in what terms to announce her change of purpose.

The expression on his countenance, which had so struck her while the train moved out of the station, was on his countenance still. He was all alone, as he thought, now ; with no need to put on a mask, with no necessity to smile, or speak, or deceive ; and as Heather, watching him, beheld that look of misery deepen and deepen, while he walked so slowly back, an awful dread took possession of her—a dread of something being about to happen which made her tremble as though in an ague-fit.

He was now beside the well—an old-fashioned one, with rope and windlass, up which the men had in former days drawn buckets of water, but now neglected and disused. It had long been covered over for fear of accidents, and though the boards had shrunk one from another with the heat of many summers, still the planking was secure enough to render all dread of accident unnecessary.

Beside this well, Arthur now paused for a moment, apparently irresolute ; then he stooped, and through the stillness the sound of a splash, of something falling down, and then touching water, ascended to where Heather stood.

At that moment she could not have moved had it been to save

her life; but she could watch, and she did, to see Arthur rise with a face from which even despair was blotted out; for despair implies a certain ability left to wrestle against, or, at all events, to feel utter hopelessness; but now, the sun looked down upon a man who had passed even that stage, who had gone through his last struggle, cast his last die.

It was with the expression of a person already dead, Arthur turned from the well and walked across the courtyard, with the key no longer swinging on his forefinger.

What could he be intending to do? Heather dropped on her knees beside the window, and watched him enter the carpenter's shop. She dared not have met him then. There came upon her such an access of terror when she heard that key splash into the water, as swept everything else out of her heart for the time being, save the most unconquerable, abject fear—a fear which prevented her even thinking, which took away the power of putting two and two together, and conceiving what project it might be Arthur had in hand.

She was like one in a dream—with a great horror on her, she fell on her knees and watched. Through it all, there was a vague, night-mare kind of consciousness that she and Arthur were locked up alone together—that escape for either of them was not possible—that if help were needed, help was now unattainable.

In her despair she prayed. Holding on by the window-sill as if she were going to be torn from it, she framed some sort of petition to God to help her. Wearied and exhausted, frightened, and with that awful, vague, nameless dread at length taking a tangible form, it seemed to her as though, for a moment, everything faded from her eyes—as though, even while her lips were moving and her heart uttering some terrified words of supplication, her senses left her for a moment—the yard swam round, the buildings went up and down before her sight, the sunlight turned to darkness, and then—

Then, as if, after having been swung out into space for an immeasurable distance, she came back to the same point again—and the mist melted away, and the light was clear once more; and with a keen vision, though still with a giddy and confused feeling

in her head, Heather beheld Arthur coming out of the carpenter's shop, dragging a bag of shavings after him, which he shot out into one of the lower floors of the silk factory.

Still she watched him. He piled shavings, sackful after sackful, among the bales of raw silk—he carried the old wrapperings and more shavings into the counting-house—she saw him bring jars of oil and turpentine and empty them on the heap he had already collected.

'He has gone mad,' she decided, rising up; 'he has gone mad, and he is going to set the place on fire; and we cannot get out, and there is no help to be obtained.'

None, for they were locked in. She dared not go down-stairs and beat at the gates, for she felt more afraid now of encountering Arthur than even of remaining where she was.

Oh! those cruel walls, those dead, eyeless, earless walls, to which she might scream herself hoarse in vain—this solitude in the midst of numbers—this helplessness, with help within a few feet of her—this prison without a gaoler—this cage in which they were both about to be burned to death.

Well enough she knew that if once the factory caught fire, no living creature could long breathe within that confined space. It would be like trying to exist in a brick oven with a furnace alight at the one end. Already she seemed to feel the hot tongues of flame licking her cheek—already the struggle for life, dear life, appeared to have begun—already the scorching heat was drying up her blood—already she was beating against the closed gates, beating with her clenched hands till they were bruised and bleeding, while the fire raged behind, and the air became hotter and hotter, the flames fiercer and fiercer.

Already the horror she had often felt of fire in that enclosed place seemed to have become a tangible reality; and, with a low cry, Heather rushed from the room, and down the staircase.

A moment before Arthur had come back across the yard, instinctively she knew for matches. Another second and it would be too late; all fear of meeting him was gone; all fear, save the dread of an awful death for both; and so she flew down the stairs and met him as he came out of his own apartment, with a box of vestas in his hand.

She need not have feared meeting him ; all the dread she had felt was as nothing compared to the terror which came into his face at sight of his wife. They had changed places now, and it was she, not he, who was strong and mad ; in her frenzy, she struck the box out of his hand, and it fell over the banisters, the matches scattering on the floor-cloth below. Then she threw herself upon him, and asked if he knew what it was he had been about to do. With passionate sobs she prayed him to stay his hand, and to spare them both. Scarcely knowing what she said, she asked what could have tempted him to such a deed ; if he were insane to think of committing so great a sin. With her arms twined around him, and her words flowing fast and unpremeditated, she poured out all her dread, her trouble, her horror, in a few hurried sentences.

She might as well have spared her remonstrances and her entreaties. From the moment he beheld his wife all hope of escape, honourable escape, even by death, from the position in which he had placed himself, vanished. He had laid his plans so well, as he thought ; and behold, in a moment, her love overthrew them all ! While she, clinging to him, went on praying and pleading, weeping and sobbing, all this passed through the man's mind. For the time he had been stunned, cowed, as though he had met a phantom ; but now, pushing her from him, with a sudden force which made her stagger and reel, he disengaged himself from her, and backing into the room he had just left, locked and bolted the door behind him.

‘Arthur!’ she cried ; but there came no answer. ‘Arthur!’ she only heard him walking across the floor.

‘Arthur!’ she shook the handle, and put her knee against the panel.

‘Arthur! for God’s sake open the door, and let me speak to you!’ still no reply.

Would he drop out by the window, and so escape and finish the work he had begun? She ran down-stairs and out of the house but the sash was not lifted. Would he try to fire the place from within? She returned to the door, and beat against it, crying, ‘only a word, dear ; only one word.’

And in reply there came something which sounded like a gurgle and a sob, followed by a heavy fall, which seemed to shake the house to its very foundation.

‘Arthur!’—there was dead silence. ‘Arthur!’ there was not even a breath in answer; nothing but silence—a silence which might be felt.

She knelt down and tried to look through the keyhole, but could distinguish nothing. As she rose, she chanced to look down at her light muslin dress, and saw that there was blood upon it—blood oozing under the door, trickling in a narrow stream out upon the landing.

She ran back the whole width of the lobby, and flung herself against the door; but of what avail was her poor strength? Then she rushed out upon the roof of the house, with a vague intention of pulling up the ladder after her, and fleeing over other roofs for help and succour; but the inexorable walls rose high above;—there was no means of escape, there was no chance of assistance.

Then she sped down the stairs once more—down the stairs and past the landing where there was already a dark pool of blood forming outside the door. She crossed the yard to the carpenter’s shop, and, seizing a hammer, ran to the outer gates, and struck blow after blow, striving to break the lock; she called and cried, but the people sweeping by never heard her, for the noise of passing conveyances deadened a voice already hoarse with excitement, exhausted with fear. She beat against the solid wood, and her blows were but woman’s blows, faint, and feeble, and weak; she screamed for help, but there was no one to hear.

In her anguish, in that awful extremity of her life, she looked once again round the yard; and, as she did so, her eye fell on the factory bell, which hung suspended on the highest point of the building.

That was her last hope; desperately, almost, she flung aside the useless hammer, and sprung to the bell; she seized the rope with her soft, white hands, and clang, clang, clang, went the clapper—clang, clang, clang.

Through the summer evening’s air, through the gathering twilight, the bell rang out—clang, clang; cling, clang, clang; the

arms never grew tired, the hands never felt the blistering of the rope. Clang, clang; Heather never ceased till she heard a knocking at the gate, and the police inquiring what was the matter?—‘who’s inside?’

Thrice Heather tried to answer them, but her lips refused to utter any articulate sound.

Then, ‘Break open the gate!’ she at length managed to reply. ‘Make haste!—make haste!’

They sent for picks and crowbars, and beat in the wood-work; when that was done a couple of policemen stepped inside, whilst a couple more kept the crowd back.

‘Come up-stairs!’ Heather said; and when they reached the landing, she pointed to the floor, and then to the room, where some tragedy, she knew, had taken place.

‘It is locked!’ she replied. ‘My husband!’

One of the men put his shoulder to the door and forced it open. He could not fling it wide, on account of something which barred the entrance; but, squeezing himself through the aperture, he entered the room, and found Arthur lying on the floor with his throat cut, and a razor beside him!

‘Bear a hand here,’ the man whispered to his fellow, ‘and don’t let her come in;’ but Heather was not to be kept back. She crept through the opening likewise, and stood face to face with that, the visible presence of the dread which had brought her back miles and miles to preserve him from one crime only—so it seemed to her—in order that he might commit another!

Between them, the men lifted the body and placed it on the bed; then one went for a doctor, and the other stood waiting for Mrs Dudley, who had gone groping after a light.

She knew where there were matches, and she soon found a candle; and when she had lighted it, she returned, and, bravely enough, looked on the face of the only man she ever loved.

‘I don’t think he’s dead, ma’am,’ said the policeman, with a rough sympathy. ‘I have been trying to stop the bleeding; and, if you will give me some more handkerchiefs, I’ll see what we can do till the doctor comes.’

Mechanically, almost, Heather gave him what he asked for.

Even in the midst of this tremendous sorrow, she could not shut out the memory of all those upheaped shavings, soaked in oil—of all, perhaps, those terrible men, now they were free of the premises, might discover.

If he were dead, he had left it all—the shame, the discovery the punishment behind ; but if he were not dead, and that detection then took place ?

Had it not been for the fact of the door being secured inside the man would have begun to suspect strange things of Heather : her manner was so singular, so wandering, so incomprehensible.

‘Do you know how this happened ?’ he asked.

‘He went mad, I think,’ she answered. ‘I am sure he was mad ; he has been odd, and unlike himself, for some time ;’ and then she began to sob convulsively.

‘Come, come, ma’am, you must not give way like this, you know,’ said the doctor, who just then entered the apartment. ‘Take charge of her, will you ?’ he added, to a person who followed him in, ‘and don’t allow her to come back here at present. There, ma’am, pray go with this gentleman ; we’ll see to whatever is necessary ; you will only be in our way.’

‘That is quite true, Mrs Dudley,’ said a familiar voice, tenderly and pityingly, and, at the sound of it, Heather looked up.

‘Oh ! Mr Croft,’ she cried, at sight of his dark face, bent down towards her with an ineffable compassion ; ‘thank God—thank God for this !’ and, clinging to his arm, she rather took him, than he her, out of the apartment, and in one of the lower rooms, where her first prayer was that ‘he would keep the people out—keep them away—till she had told him everything—ev-ery thing !’

In a few minutes, Douglas Croft was in possession of the facts of the case, so far as Heather herself was cognisant of them, but his clear head saw farther than she had been able to do. He understood there must be some cause for this sudden freak of madness—some reason why Arthur wished the place destroyed.

‘And we shall have to find out the reason before morning,’ he said. ‘Now, Mrs Dudley, may I depend upon your calmness—may I be certain of your assistance ? There has evidently been more than life involved in this matter, and we must sift it

thoroughly to the bottom. I suppose I may examine any papers I find up-stairs? Pray remain here for the present; I shall be back again directly.'

It was no very difficult undertaking for a man like Douglas Croft to satisfy the police that anything which had happened in Lukin's factory during the course of the last few hours was perfectly correct, and in the ordinary course of every-day events, and that the only plan now to be adopted was to send for a locksmith, have a new fastening put upon the gates, and the needful repairs in the wood-work effected without delay.

Neither did he experience any greater trouble in making the doctor understand that there was something which had preceded the attempt at suicide, and which it was desirable on all accounts to attribute to temporary insanity.

'Whether he live or die,' finished Mr Croft, 'and, in my opinion, it matters very little which he does, this freak must be regarded as that of a lunatic. Meantime, if you have no objection to meeting my friend Mr Rymner Henry, I think it might be a satisfaction to Mrs Dudley to know you have had a consultation.'

In reply to which speech, Doctor Milworth, bowing low, expressed himself to the effect, that he had no objection whatever to meeting Mr Henry—that he should like to meet him, in fact, which may seem the less astonishing, perhaps, when it is explained, that during the entire time Doctor Milworth took charge of the case, he was in the habit of going about among his other patients, watch in hand, and casually remarking he was rather in a hurry to-day, because he had to meet Mr Rymner Henry at a quarter past two, or a quarter to five, or four precisely, according to the hour mentioned by that celebrated surgeon, 'in consultation on a most important case.'

Why Mr Croft considered it necessary to send for further advice, he himself perhaps could not very clearly have told, for he knew that if Arthur Dudley were to live, Dr Milworth had done everything that could be done towards compassing that object. Possibly he might have some idea of thereby winning the doctor's greater confidence, ensuring his greater secrecy, for already Douglas Croft

held in his hand a letter which he believed would prove a clue to all this mystery.

It was from Mr Lukin, stating that on the 23rd he should be in London to *inspect the books*.

'That is the secret, then,' thought Douglas Croft; 'before you inspect the books, though, Mr Lukin, I will take a look at them myself. I do not think there will be much difficulty in unravelling the skein; I am greatly mistaken if he possessed brains sufficient to cook his accounts, and perhaps for that very reason he may have got them into a confounded mess.'

When Mr Croft, however, tried to pass into the office he failed to do so, by reason of the piles of shavings and other combustible materials which stopped the entrance.

'I want a reliable man, Mrs Dudley,' he said, returning to her; 'a man who can be trusted to hold his tongue, if he be paid for doing so. Is there amongst the work-people such a treasure to be found?'

'Yes,' she answered; 'Morrison. I am certain we may trust him.'

'Where is he to be found?' asked her friend.

'I do not know his address, though I could find my way to his house. I will go and fetch him this moment.'

'I will accompany you,' he said; but next moment, remembering some one in the Dudley interest ought to remain on the premises, he stood perplexed and silent, while Heather said,—

'I am not afraid of going. Do you think, after to-night, any small thing will ever frighten me again?'

'Poor child, poor child,' he murmured, 'what a life yours has been!'

'Don't pity me,' she said; 'do not, or my heart will break; it feels almost breaking as it is, and a kind word chokes me. I will go for Morrison; I will go at once.'

There was no help for it; so he went with her as far as the gate and watched her while she flitted away along the street—watched her till she turned a corner and was lost to view.

Then he went up-stairs again to hear how the patient was doing,

and after a chat with the doctor and nurse, for whom the doctor had sent, walked down to the gates again, and waited till Heather entered, bringing Morrison with her.

‘A nice business this!’ remarked Mr Croft, when Mrs Dudley had left the two men standing together in the yard; ‘a nice business it might have turned out. Where could your eyes have been not to see Mr Dudley was as mad as a March hare when you left off work? If it had not been for Mrs Dudley, there would have been a fine bonfire here to-night.’

‘Well, sir, my mind did misgive me,’ was the reply; ‘and more especially along of these here shavings. I told Mr Dudley they were not safe stowed away in that there carpenter’s shop, with the gas escaping like anything. I wanted to have them cleared out, and offered to wait and see it properly done, but he said he wanted to go out and could not have them moved till Monday. He looked real down wild when he said it, and my mind misgave me; but I never thought of him trying such a start as this.’

‘Mr Lukin will be here on Monday, and you can tell him all about it, just as it happened,’ said Mr Croft; ‘but don’t let the men get hold of his having tried to fire the place. It would not be pleasant for poor Mrs Dudley.’

‘Which a real lady is,’ finished Morrison; ‘many a time I was sorry to see her here, so unsuitable it seemed. Never fear, sir, nobody shall hear the story from me, not even Mr Lukin. I need not tell him Mrs Dudley came for me; and when we get these things out of the way, and the place to rights a bit, no one need be any the wiser.’

‘And, as I cannot find any of the keys, I shall take the books in for security, if you will hand them to me,’ said Mr Croft. And so he had the books carried across the yard and placed on the dining-room table, where in five minutes he discovered the deficiency.

‘If I can only now open the safe, we may snap our fingers at Mr Lukin,’ thought Heather’s friend, as he closed the books and shut in the record of the borrowed money which had almost overturned Arthur’s reason.

Then he sought Mrs Dudley, who was seated in an arm-chair,

resting her head on both hands. And before her on the table lay a little locket, which Mr Croft recognized as having been taken from the poor broken creature who, still hanging between life and death, was quiet enough up-stairs—quiet enough and low enough to have contented his enemy, if he had one.

‘You are very ill, I fear,’ Mr Croft said, in that almost caressing tone which had won its way to Bessie’s heart in the sunshiny days that seemed now so far—so far away. He possessed two natures, this man, who had loved the girl so passionately and deceived her so grossly : one tender and compassionate, the other reckless and cynical. ‘You are very ill, I fear ; in the press of other matters you have been neglected. Let me see to you now a little—what is there you can have, likely to do you any good?’

‘I do not know,’ she answered. ‘I have been up-stairs and seen him. Oh ! Mr Croft, what are the chances of his recovery ? tell me the truth. It is not likely the doctor would be frank with me.’

‘I think it greatly depends on his being kept quiet ; there is nothing now that ought to distress or worry him. I have discovered the cause of all this misery ; it is a very trifling cause indeed which has produced such results.’

‘Is it ?’ She lifted her head for a moment as she said this, and looked into Mr Croft’s face, then her glance wandered towards the locket. He could not quite comprehend her.

‘A mere trifle,’ he repeated ; and then he told her all. He thought it best to do this—better that she should understand the whole of the circumstances clearly, so as to be able to comprehend exactly how he intended setting the affair straight.

‘And I had that money of yours in the house all the time,’ Heather said, with that weary, weary look in her face which seemed to Mr Croft worse than the most violent sorrow—‘what you gave me, you know, to keep—for—Bessie !’

The last word was spoken more like an exclamation than as though it had belonged in any way to the previous part of the sentence ; and Mr Croft, following the direction of her eyes, beheld the door closed hurriedly, and heard the rustle of a dress in the passage.

In a moment he was out in the hall, and had caught the retreating figure.

‘Bessie!’ he cried; ‘Bessie—Bessie! don’t go! I will leave, if you object to my staying here, but we can both help Mrs Dudley. See, I will not follow you in!’

She covered her face with the corner of her shawl, covered it that he might not even look upon her, and passed back into the parlour without a word. ‘Heather, my darling, what is this?’ she asked. ‘Morrison came round for me, but could only give the most confused account of what had happened. Tell me, love—tell me all; don’t sit looking at me like that, but speak, dear; what is it?’ And she crouched down on the ground, and winding her arms round Heather’s neck, drew the dear face close to her own. ‘What is this trouble, sweet?’ she persisted; but the only answer Heather could make was, ‘Oh! Bessie!—oh! Bessie!’ as she held the locket towards her, moaning, moaning all the while.

‘Do you wish me to open it?’ Bessie inquired; and Heather made a gesture of assent. She had always been a little jealous, and now she was afraid to reveal, with her own hands, the secret it contained. And yet she longed to know—was it portrait or hair—was it an old love-token, or a more recent souvenir which her husband had worn next his heart, next where she ought to have been alone? God keep us all from hard and hasty and suspicious judgments. With the man up-stairs hovering between life and death, Heather still could not help misjudging him. Worse than the whole of the long ordeal she had passed through was the sight of that golden trifle, which she dared not examine, which Bessie first turned over and then opened, holding it up to the light as she did so.

There was a scrap of hair in it—a tiny curl of golden red, and ‘Lally’ engraved in black letters round the edge.

‘Where did you get this, Heather?’ she inquired.

‘He wore it,’ Heather answered.

‘He! Oh! poor—poor Arthur!’ and the tears poured from Bessie’s eyes as she looked upon the trinket. She had never thought to like Arthur greatly, or be sorry for him over-much;

but now it seemed to her, thinking of the tragedy which had just been enacted, that no one had ever quite understood him, ever imagined it possible Arthur should find out his error, and try to repair it too late—too late !

‘Why do you say “Poor Arthur?”’ Heather broke forth, passionately ; ‘why do you not pity me, finding out, after all, he was wearing next his heart a love-token from that woman—that bad, cruel—’

‘Hush, Heather !—hush—hush !’ and Bessie put the open locket into her friend’s hand. ‘See what it really is—not what you imagine at all.’

Incredulously, almost, Heather did as she was requested ; then ‘Lally—Lally !’ said the bereaved mother ; ‘Lally, Lally !’ and she covered the locket with hungry kisses.

‘I have passed through the bitterness of death to-night, Bessie !’ she exclaimed, at length. ‘I think it must be near morning now.’

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SUNSET AT BERRIE TOWN.

It was near morning ; but before that new time, full of hope, and joy, and promise, dawned upon her life, there came a period of blessed unconsciousness, during which Heather Dudley lay ignorant of all passing events.

How Arthur came back from the valley of the shadow—how the management of their affairs was taken by stronger and abler hands than any which had hitherto touched them—how everything was made right with Mr Lukin, and gossip silenced, and ill-nature refuted, she did not know until the long fever was over—until, seated again beside one of the windows of that pleasant drawing-room at Berrie Down, she could have fancied the events I have tried in this story to chronicle were all parts and portions of some unpleasant dream--of some weary attack of delirium.

For they were once more in the old house, which Mr Croft had purchased when it was for sale, and the management of which he had offered through his agent first to Arthur, and then to Alick.

‘And, had I known who my real master was,’ said that young gentleman, ‘I never would have accepted the post.’

‘Are you sorry you were ignorant?’ asked Mr Croft, with a smile, glancing towards Heather.

‘No—oh no!’ was the quick reply; for every one now knew that when Mr Croft appeared so opportunely in Silk-street, he was coming to tell Mrs Dudley of his wife’s death—coming to say, that if Bessie could only be induced to accept him, he would make reparation—he would prove his repentance.’

There was not a relation he had in the world who opposed his decision—not one who, hearing the full details of that sad story, urged a word against the girl whom he desired, after a due interval, to make his wife.

All the reluctance was with Bessie—all the difficulty he experienced lay in her disinclination to speak to him, or listen to his suit.

‘Her child,’ she said to Heather, ‘would be looked down on.’ Her child who, now chattering his first intelligible sentences, ran through the gardens at Berrie Down, making that sound of young life about the place which is always so pleasant to hear.

But there was hope for the suitor, nevertheless. In due time, Heather promised to take up his cause.

‘I will talk to her when I get strong,’ she said to Mr Croft; and with that assurance he rested satisfied.

As for Mrs Poole Seymour, she was quite enthusiastic about the affair.

‘My dear,’ she declared, ‘you must not be cruel. You ought to be the first to forgive him, since it was your pretty face led him so far astray; and as for your child—the estate is not entailed—what matter? besides, Mr Stewart is so rich, and has taken to you so immensely?’

Which was true. Mr Stewart was delighted with Bessie, and perhaps even more delighted with her child—a fine, sturdy young

fellow, who, riding on Nep, encountered Mr Stewart one day in Berrie Down.

‘What is your name, my little man?’ asked the bachelor, stopping him and his nurse, Priscilla.

‘Mamma says I’m a young Turk,’ was the answer. ‘What’s yours?’

‘Oh! I’m an old Turk,’ replied Mr Stewart; whereupon the child burst out laughing; and, striking Nep with his heels, the dog broke into a sling-trot and bore Master Douglas off to Berrie Down.

‘He only told you the truth, sir,’ said Priscilla, before she started off in pursuit; ‘he’s an awful young Turk.’

In due time, Mr Stewart reached the Hollow, where he found Lord Kemms, who was decidedly smitten by Agnes; and they all spent the evening talking quietly together while the sun sank into the west, and bathed the whole country lying exposed to his beams in a glory of crimson and purple and gold.

‘I have brought you a little present, Heather,’ Mr Stewart said, drawing near the sofa she occupied. ‘It is the custom for god-fathers to give their god-children little presents occasionally, and I fear I have been somewhat neglectful of you. Open it when I am gone, and he slipped a parcel into her hand.

But Heather, with a pretty wilfulness, opened it at once, and drawing out the parchments it contained, found them to be the title-deeds of Berrie Down.

‘Yours, my dear,’ said Mr Stewart, ‘to have and to hold for ever.’

‘Arthur, Arthur!’ she cried; and Arthur, looking still white and worn, came towards his wife, who put the papers into his hand, saying, ‘See, love, what Mr Stewart has given me?’

‘Only remember, Mr Dudley, we must have no speculating; you must keep it intact for your son,’ added Mr Stewart—in answer to which remark, Arthur took his wife’s hand in his, murmuring, ‘So help me God!’

Before the sun quite set, Heather drew a shawl around her, and, leaving the pleasant company, passed out on to the lawn, and wandered away towards the Hollow.

‘She is thinking of Lally,’ Alick whispered to Arthur; and

Arthur, following his wife, prayed and begged of her not to grieve for the child that was no more.

‘Heather,’ he said, humbly, ‘I have been but a poor husband to you ; but I will try in the future to be “better to you than many children.” Do not fret, love, do not fret.’

But Heather was not fretting. She felt now that her darling was where she could see continually the face of ‘Our Father which is in Heaven.’

THE END.

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